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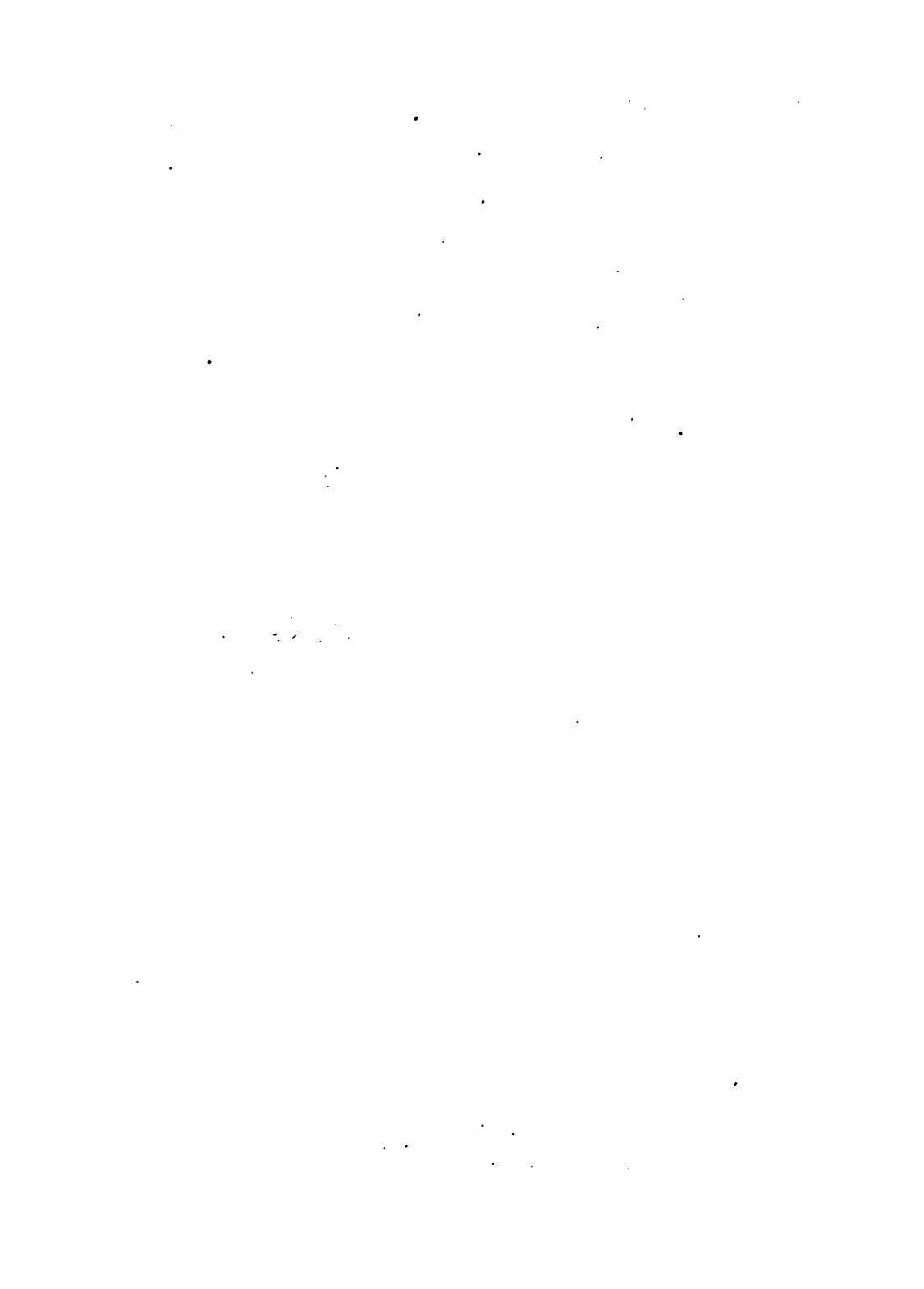
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WARNTON KINGS.





WARNTON KINGS.

BY

JOHN AMPHLETT.

"Go, little book, and sail upon the sea
Of men's opinions : if ill-built, thou'rt lost ;
If well, perchance thou wilt return to me,
Fill'd full with golden hope, tho' tempest-tossed."



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WARNTON KINGS.

CHAPTER I.

THE TEMPORAL AND SPIRITUAL HEADS OF WARNTON KINGS.



WARNTON KINGS is a large parish in the midland counties, pleasantly situated on the southern slopes of a range of low hills, which are the play-ground of the inhabitants of the less-favoured Black Country not many miles away. Warnton Court, the residence of the Squire, is some distance from the village, and is surrounded by a large well-timbered park, through which the Chancebridge high-road runs, cleverly hidden from the house by a sunk fence, but from which, nevertheless, a pleasant view is obtained of the Court, nestling, at the foot of the hills, amongst





WARNTON KINGS.



much disappointing several of his University friends. The Rev. Edward Perry was the son of a wealthy publican, who had been sent by his father to college, and when he was presented to the living of Warnton he had been ordained only a short time. Soon after he became vicar of Warnton Kings, his father died and left him a moderate income; at which time he thought fit to marry his early love, the daughter of a tradesman in his native town.

He was, at the time my story commences, a middle-aged parson, with two daughters, Alicia and Ellen, and was completely under the control of his wife Elizabeth, a little energetic woman, to whose decrees he yielded implicit obedience, the utmost of disagreement that he ever expressed being the phrase, "Elizabeth, my dear," uttered in a tone of mild expostulation. At the same time his obedience did not arise so much from his being actually mastered by his wife, as from a certain laziness of disposition, mingled with a liking to be cared for, even if the care taken did sometimes merge into a command. Alicia, his elder daughter, who was commonly called Lishy, was a tall, good-looking girl of some twenty-two years of age, while her sister

Ellen was three years her junior. The Rev. Edward Perry, called amongst his parishioners when he was out of hearing, Parson Ned, had certainly been in luck's way when he preached his fateful sermon before the noble earl, for no prettier parsonage was there for miles around than the one he became the master of. It was a nice old-fashioned house, covered with roses and clematis, standing in grounds which were perhaps too large to be kept in order by a parson who had nothing but the living to depend upon; but all the same they were very enviable with their old trees, and ponds, and shady walks. At all events Parson Ned was well contented with his lot in life.

In the library at Warnton Court, one day not long after the death of young Warnton, sat Ralph Warnton and Mr. Perry. The Squire had now somewhat got over the first shock of the news, and could talk things over with the parson without such pain as it would have caused some weeks ago.

"I shall make no will," said the Squire to Mr. Perry, for they were talking of the future destination of the property.

"You ought to, I think," said Mr. Perry;

"it gives rise to so much litigation in the case of a large property not to do so."

"There is no one that I care about to leave it to, and I care nothing for their litigation," said the Squire.

"I think it is everybody's duty to dispose of their worldly goods in a fitting manner."

"No, Mr. Perry, my mind is made up; the heir-at-law, if there is one, shall have it when I am gone, and there is not much to make me wish to stay in this world now."

When Mr. Perry returned home, he told his wife of the conversation he had had with Mr. Warnton. Alicia and Nellie happened to be in the room when he did so, and the fact that Ralph Warnton had determined to make no will made a great impression on the mind of his elder daughter.





CHAPTER II.

MRS. PERRY TALKS TO HER HUSBAND.

NOW Mrs. Perry had had in her mind for many years a favourite scheme, which she had not mentioned even to her husband, and that was the marriage of her daughter Lishey with young Ralph Warnton. Lishy, who was a wide-awake young lady, had not been ignorant of the fact, though she pretended not to notice it, that young Warnton was in the habit of throwing admiring glances in her direction ; and these looks had been noticed also by Mrs. Perry, who thereupon imagined that she had only to be careful in her management, to secure a good match for her daughter, and a wealthy son-in-law for herself. But now the untimely fate of the young squire had put a stop to all her ambitious plans, and at the same time

caused her to unseal her lips to her husband, to whom she looked for sympathy in her disappointment.

"My dear," said she to the parson, one day when Lishy and Nellie had gone out for a walk, "what a very sad thing the death of poor young Warnton is."

"That it is, Elizabeth," answered the parson, for as he had heard the same remark from his wife many times before, he did not trouble himself to make any very original observation upon it, and probably thought that a general assent was, considering the subject, both highly proper and easy to be given. Now Mrs. Perry had this day made up her mind to take her husband into her confidence as to her hopes, now disappointed, a subject she had often approached when there had been some prospect of carrying out her wishes, but had never cared to go on with when she came to the point, perhaps feeling, on second thoughts, that she was quite capable of managing the affair without him. And although she wished for a recognition of her cleverness in thinking of such a thing, yet at the same time she wished to hide her disappointment under a mask of indifference.

"Do you know, my dear Edward," said she, "that I had for some time thought it not improbable that he would take a fancy to Lishey?"

"Indeed, Elizabeth," answered Mr. Perry. Now the parson had two modes of expressing surprise, the one the expression "Indeed," and the other, "Dear me," and of these two, "Indeed" was by far the stronger. "Indeed, Elizabeth; I had no idea of such a thing."

"I had often noticed his behaviour in her company," said his wife, "and although I was not over-anxious for it, still I thought it would not be a bad match for Lishey."

Mr. Perry, to whom this was an entirely new idea, and who also was of a rather retiring disposition, considering, perhaps, that as he was not good enough to manage his wife he must necessarily be of no good for other things, thought differently, and conveyed his thoughts to his wife by the phrase, "Elizabeth, my dear, did you?"

"Yes," answered she, very well perceiving the adverse position of her husband's mind, and warming against it; "and why not?"

The parson had many "why-nots" in his mind, but being, as has been said before, of a very mild disposition towards his wife, he considered it

wiser not to state them, but fell back upon the expedient of asking his wife in the first place to state why.

"Lishey is a lady by education and fortune, and a vicar's daughter," continued Mrs. Perry; "and what more could a country squire require?"

The parson's wife quite forgot to mention that although Alicia was the daughter of a clergyman she was the grand-daughter of a publican on one side, and a greengrocer on the other; but this was all the time present before the parson, and his next thought was how to convey the same to his wife without raising too great a storm, for Mrs. Perry, now that she was a vicar's wife, wished quite to forget that she was a greengrocer's daughter, and resented every intimation that such was the case. At last he said—

"You forget, my dear, that the Warntons are a very old family, while we can boast no such long pedigree."

"And what respect, pray, can one have for a pedigree blotted with the names of such spend-thrifts as some of the last Warntons have been? I consider that no Warnton would be disgraced by marrying my daughter."

"Yet you must consider, Elizabeth," said the parson, in his gentlest of tones, "that no earl would consider his daughter disgraced by her marriage with a Warnton."

"Earls sometimes do not bear the best of characters," retorted his wife, with supreme disregard for the connection of her arguments; for her outward disparagement of the peerage was only equalled by her inward reverence for that institution.

"But though they may be bad men, they are nevertheless generally proud," responded the parson.

"So am I proud, quite proud enough to think my daughter a match for a Warnton," said his wife.

"It is not what you think personally, Elizabeth," answered the parson earnestly, "but what the world thinks of you, that regulates the actions of the world with respect to you. Besides, why have we entered into this discussion? At all events, she cannot become Mrs. Warnton now."

The parson therefore deprecated the continuance of the conversation, and his wife, who had shown her husband what her views as to her

daughter had been, retired in silence to her work-basket, and commenced the cutting-out of some pinafores and other mysterious things for the school-children.

Mr. Perry took up the county paper, but he did not read much of it. Behind its ample sheets he was pondering on the new idea presented to him by his wife. He knew the world well enough to be certain of the verdict it would form on such a marriage, and I am not quite sure if he was not a trifle thankful that it could not now occur to disturb his peaceful life. He had no ambitious schemes for his daughters; he wished each to marry, if at all, someone in her own station of life, someone who would truly be a son to him, and not a man too far above him in social position.

Mrs. Perry was not altogether satisfied with herself as she sat in her low chair at work; she had not won that sympathy with her disappointment that she required, and had been so much surprised at the unexpected opposition on the part of her husband, that she had entered into the discussion too warmly, and had quite forgotten the sentence with which she began, "I was not anxious for it." And besides, she had

been betrayed into this warmth over a subject that could be of no benefit to her. Therefore Mrs. Perry was not quite comfortable in mind when Lishey and her sister returned from their walk.





CHAPTER III.

THE PARISHIONERS TALK AMONG THEMSELVES.

THE Warnton Arms had been originally a small country inn, but the crowds of people that came to visit the Warnton hills in the summer, had caused the landlord to extend his premises for their accommodation, and now the original house was quite overshadowed by a new building, which stood some few yards away. But this was all shut up in the winter months, and very little business did the landlord, Joe Dorman, then transact, unless it was providing a mug of ale for the passing waggoner, or supplying the village worthies with a glass of spirits every now and then, when they came to talk over parish matters in Joe Dorman's snug little taproom. These

meetings had been more frequent of late, for of course the affliction at the Court had given rise to much commiseration amongst the villagers, who naturally took a great interest in all that occurred in their Squire's family.

Now one quiet evening, Thomas Cross, the clerk, and Sam Cleaver, the village smith, had been discussing with the host for the hundredth time the interesting question of who would have the Warnton property. It was a subject which of course had a great attraction for them, and their interest in it was kept alive by reports from the Court which represented Ralph Warnton as getting feebler and weaker day by day.

"I hear the Squire is no better," said Cross, taking the long clay pipe he was smoking out of his mouth and refilling it.

"I am afraid he never will be," replied Cleaver, with a shake of his head.

"It does puzzle me to think who will get the property," said Cross.

"Somebody must get it," said the smith; "a place like that don't go long without an owner."

"I shouldn't wonder if the lawyers got it," suggested Joe Dorman, who, having once had

dealings with a lawyer about some small legacy left him by a relative, and having had a long bill to pay, by which his legacy was greatly diminished, thought that lawyers were capable of getting hold of anything in the shape of property.

"Perhaps so," said the clerk, again taking his pipe out of his mouth, and giving each sentence as he uttered it an emphatic tap with its long white stem; "and I do say this, that it is a great shame if folks don't say who are to be their heirs, and so leave the lawyers no chance of getting hold of their property."

"That is just what I say," said the host, who had listened to Cross with a grin of satisfaction at finding his words seconded by that person; "always keep out of the lawyers' hands."

It must not be supposed from the foregoing little speech of the parish clerk's, that that worthy knew that the Squire had made no will: no, it was rather a censure upon him for not letting the parish know who was to be his successor under the present circumstances, while Joe Dorman, who listened only to the sound of words, and not to what they meant, thought himself very clever in his observation.

"I wonder if there is any truth in the report

about the Loytons? I believe there is," said Sam Cleaver.

"I have heard it said very positively that James Loyton, the young man that works for Lastey, the nurseryman at Chancebridge, is the next heir," said Cross.

"Does he know it's said so?" asked Dorman.

"People oftener know that they have expectations," answered Cross sententiously, "than they know that their expectations will be realized."

"John Pilgrimson knows more about it than he says," said Cleaver.

"John's blackness hides a lot more than you think for, I can tell you," added Cross.

John Pilgrimson was a mystery to, and therefore the oracle of, the villagers at Warnton Kings. He was a man of about sixty years of age, who, some thirty or more years back, had come into the village with good clothes on his back and with money in his pocket, and had taken lodgings at a pretty little cottage: soon his money was all gone; he made no attempt, seemingly, to get more, but at once sank down to the position of a labouring man, hung about the stables at the Court, and in course of time set up as the village sweep.

Much comment had this given rise to at the time ; he gave his name as John Pilgrimson, and no one knew whether it was his own or assumed. The only things he saved were some few old books which he kept locked up in a little box, the key of which he always carried tied to a piece of string, which he hung round his neck. John had now no settled lodgings. Joe Dorman took charge of his box, and allowed him to keep his brushes and brooms in an old out-house, while John himself slept under a hedge, or in a cowshed, or wherever he could find a shelter from the weather. John Pilgrimson had evidently had a good education ; he could, it was said, when he first came into the parish even quote Latin and Greek, but of late years his quotations became very few, and very weak in their pronunciation.

Many had been the suspicions on John Pilgrimson's arrival in the village. But this was thirty or more years ago, and the men who talked about him, and wondered at him, and suspected him when he first came, had long been carried to the green churchyard, and the present generation knew but little of the meetings and consultations and suggestions that he had given rise to ;

they did not ponder on his reasons for coming, or where he had come from, like their fathers had done; though he was still a mystery, they accepted him as one without question, and the only effect it had was to attach a little more weight to his utterances, and give him credit for knowing things to which, perhaps, he could lay no claim.

"Yes; John knows something about it," repeated Cleaver, the smith; "what an interest he has always taken in affairs up at the Court."

"He says that it's because he knew the old Squire, this one's father, you know, who used to take great notice of John when he came here first and was in his service," explained Cross, "but I think there must be other reasons."

"And don't you remember," continued Cleaver, "when poor Master Ralph was at school, John, who had just received a little money, walked the long twelve miles to his school, and spent all he had on cakes and tarts for young Ralph and his friends."

"Yes, yes, I remember," answered Cross, "and I remember how he let it out. John had been having quite as much beer as he could manage, and told us all about it, how he bought some confectionery, as he called it, and took it

out to the boys in the street on a tray ; and there was a tall conceited fellow there, who was too proud to take tarts from a poor sweep ; but John said when all the confectionery was gone this fellow wanted some too, and John seems to have given him quite a lecture upon making the most of his opportunities. And after John had told us that he fell to moralizing and more beer."

Joe Dorman, who had listened to all this most attentively, at last ventured to express his opinion that "there must be something in it."

"I don't mind saying there is something in it," asserted Cross, again seconding Joe's words, and thereby causing another knowing grin to cover his round face, "and what it is we shall see before long, I fancy, if the Squire don't mend."

And with these words the clerk arose, for he had finished alike his pipe and his brandy-and-water, but, just as he was going out of the door, Sam Cleaver called after him,

"By the way, Cross, what do you think of our new curate?"

"I think, as far as I can see, he is a capital sort," answered Cross.

"And so do I," assented Cleaver. "I am glad to see he wears a sensible coat, and none of your up-

to-the-neck and down-to-the-heels contrivances, that look as if a man was trying to see how much cloth he could hang about him without going in for petticoats at once," continued he, for he entertained a pious horror of what he termed "mummery," though probably, if asked to define the term, he would have said, as many other people would if they were candid, that "mummery" was anything he did not like.

"We shall see more of him in a few days, you can hardly judge of him so soon," said Cross, and, nodding a good-night to his two friends, he went out.

"Sam," said Joe Dorman after Thomas Cross had gone, "do you think there is anything in it?"

"In what, Joe?"

"Why, in what he says about John Pilgrimson," said he, taking a thumb from the arm-hole of his waistcoat, its customary resting-place, and pointing it over his shoulder.

"I shouldn't wonder if there was," answered Cleaver, taking up his hat. . "Good-night, Joe," said he, as he went out of the door.

Then Joe, who very seldom thought for himself, barred and locked his front door, and imagined, poor man, that he knew all about it.



CHAPTER IV.

THE NEW CURATE APPEARS UPON THE SCENE.

THE Reverend Edward Perry delegated part of his parochial duties to a curate; not that there was too much work in the parish for one clergyman, but that his wife thought it added to his dignity to do so, while he was really not unwilling to have some of his labour taken off his hands. The stipend he gave to his curate was a good one: he paid his gardener five-and-twenty shillings a week, and did not expect his curate to find sermons, gentlemanly clothes, and gentlemanly manners for only a few shillings a week more.

The last curate had been presented to a small family living, and therefore the parson had been

obliged to find a successor to him. Nor was he long in finding one, for the stipend he offered was such as to give him the choice between numerous applicants, and the Reverend Irwin Winnersley had now been three days in the parish. Of course, as Cross had wisely remarked, it was too soon to judge of him, but at the same time it was evident from his appearance, as far as it had been observed, that if not yet proved a good sort, as Cross had put it, at all events he was likely to be so.

He was a tall fine man, with a round good-looking face, a good complexion, and curly brown whiskers. Decidedly handsome, said the parishioners, after they had well looked at him. His costume was perhaps a trifle too unclerical to suit some tastes; there was little beside the white tie and the dark trousers to indicate that his profession was the church. His University career had been nothing remarkable; he had taken no honours, but he had passed his examinations with so much credit that it had given rise to the idea that he might have done greater things had he tried.

Now the arrival of a new curate made a great stir in the parish; the people watched, like boys

at school watch a new master, to see if he went on in the old track, and did things in the same way as his predecessor, or whether he had any new customs or peculiarities they must get used to.

Nor was the least anxious mind in the parish that of Mrs. Larchpole of The Lawns. Mrs. Larchpole was, so to speak, a clergyfancier: she petted them, patronized them, trotted them out at her quiet little luncheons, and studied their points as the trainer studies the points of his racehorse, or the coursing-man those of his greyhounds. Mr. Larchpole was quite indifferent to these proceedings; he liked to see his table well furnished with guests, but perhaps in his own heart he would rather not have had quite so much of the clerical element there represented; however, he made no objection to any thing his wife did, but allowed her her own way in all matters relating to his table. The consequence was that a strong friendship had arisen between Mrs. Larchpole and Parson Perry's wife.

To such an extent was this friendship carried, that three nights a week, as regularly as the week itself went round, the brougham might be heard, at ten p.m. exactly, driving through the village to fetch Mrs. Larchpole from

the Vicarage. Mr. Larchpole himself did not often accompany her; his business occupations took him a forty minutes' journey by rail into the Black Country nearly every day, and caused him to prefer his smoking room and the daily paper to accompanying his wife when he returned home at night.

Mrs. Larchpole, if all she said was to be accepted as true, was a woman of immense experience; no ailment was spoken of in her presence for which she had not a remedy; no circumstance had happened to anybody the like of which had not happened to her or some of her friends; yet all her experience of the woes, ailments, and misfortunes of life had not soured her, for a kinder and better-hearted woman never existed.

On the day in question, when the curate had been three days in the parish, Mrs. Larchpole had asked him to luncheon. The Reverend Mr. Winnersley started from his lodgings in the village early, since The Lawns was at least a mile away, and he wished to walk leisurely. Now John Pilgrimson, who had been pursuing his profession in some chimneys in the direction of The Lawns, was then engaged in bringing

home his soot and his brushes on his old hand-cart—a hand-cart that could be recognized at any distance away, from the fact that one of its wheels, through either age or accident, or both combined, made all sorts of angles with its fellow wheel in their contemporary journeys round the axle. Their respective courses caused the sweep and the curate to meet, and the sweep, who liked to have a talk with his betters, stopped his cart as he saw the curate approaching, and as he came up to him, touched his sooty old cap, and then began in a tone of enquiry,

“ So you’re the new curate, are you ? ”

Mr. Winnersley, who had already heard of the sweep, by no means objecting to increase his knowledge of any of his parishioners, including the one who stood before him, stopped also, and answered,

“ Yes, I am ; and I suppose I am right if I say that you are John Pilgrimson, the sweep.”

John was very outspoken in his opinions : it was a freedom of speech he perhaps had acquired through the deference paid to his words by his neighbours, and therefore he seldom hesitated to let a person know what he thought of him.

"Well," said John, scanning the curate from top to toe, "you look as if you would be one of the right sort."

"If by one of the right sort you mean one who is good friends with his neighbours, I certainly hope I shall," answered the curate, looking amused.

John Pilgrimson had always the faintest tinge of melancholy in his voice, and when he spoke he would seem to be speaking more to himself than anyone else. "The last curate was not a bad one," continued he, leaning against the wheel of his cart, and steadfastly regarding the stones at his feet, instead of the person he was speaking to, and not thinking that by praising the last curate he was to a certain extent disparaging the present one. "He was a bit stuck up, though," he went on; "he seldom stopped to have a bit of talk with a man when he met him, unless it was to scold him for something or other, or tell him something about the church," now unconsciously telling the curate that he possessed one of the good qualities, in the sweep's estimation, his predecessor had lacked.

Mr. Winnersley, much as he wished to make friends with all his parishioners, did not care to

enter into a dissertation upon the merits of curates past and present, so he thought it better to change the subject by asking the sweep if he had much to do in the way of his profession.

"Well, yes, pretty well," answered the sweep, "I am on the road, backwards and forwards, most days, but I don't seem to get as much as I used to: perhaps my brushes are getting old, and the Chancebridge sweep comes in a cart with a pony and new brushes, and the old must always give way to the new; and the Squire, too, up at the Court, don't burn the fires he used to; why," continued he, looking up, "I have swept as many as twenty chimneys in a day at the big house, but it is all changed there now."

"I suppose the death of his son makes a great difference to him?" said the curate.

"Ah, indeed it does," said John, relapsing into his melancholy tone, "and well it may; he was a nice young fellow was young Ralph; there was no one like him any where about, and the last of the family too. I'd known him all his life, and his father, and his grandfather; the old Squire, this one's father that's now at the Court, was a queer one; a good fellow he was, but dreadful passionate. He used to keep hounds,

and I used to be a kind of whip for him when I was young, for I was very fond of horses," and then he stopped, and, after a short pause, muttered, as if to himself, "yes, very fond of horses." And then recovering himself with a sort of start, continued: "The old Squire used to notice me a good deal, and that's why I take such an interest in the family;" and the sweep paused and looked steadily at the ground.

"And do you get a good price for your soot?" asked Mr. Winnersley, who was getting interested in his sooty parishioner, and rather wished to see more of him.

The sweep seemed to brighten up at this question, as if he was glad to be brought back from the train of thought he had gradually entered upon.

"Pretty well, sir," said he; "I get sixpence a bushel for it, but I have known the time when the farmers have run after me with shillings. Mr. Larrond, who has the big farm on the side of the hill yonder, takes all I have now. But he has such a big bushel to measure by—my bushel has imperial on it, and that ought to be all right, oughtn't it, sir? But I tried the two bushels by each other, and his swallowed mine up altogether.

But you're waiting to get on, I dare say," continued the sweep, touching his cap, and taking up the shaft of his hand-cart.

"Well, I think I must walk on," said Mr. Winnersley, "but I am glad to have met you and to have had a talk with you."

Then the sweep, with a "Good day, sir," pushed on his cart, and the two wheels pursued their erratic course to Joe Dorman's rubbish yard, in one corner of which John kept his store of soot.

"Well, John," said Sam Cleaver, who happened to be there when John arrived, "have you done pretty well to-day?"

"Pretty well, thank ye," said John, "nothing very great."

"You seem to have a goodish bag full," said Sam, who liked sometimes to poke a bit of fun at John. "How much is soot, and how much ashes?"

"I don't put ashes in my soot," said John indignantly.

"Oh no," answered Sam, "a milkman I once knew never put water to his milk, but only rinsed out the cans a bit before he put the milk in, and I thought perhaps you had put some

ashes in your bag to make the soot turn out better."

"My soot turns out well enough without," replied John, "but there is this to be said, that a smith has not much chance of cheating, unless it is putting iron where he ought to put steel."

"And selling his ashes to the sweep, eh, John?" asked Sam Cleaver; "never mind, there are tricks in all trades, even in that of a sweep. Let us go in and have a glass of beer." And John Pilgrimson, having stowed away his cart, followed Sam Cleaver, nothing loth, into Joe Dorman's tap-room.

In the meantime the Rev. Irwin Winnersley had been pursuing his way towards The Lawns. He had before his mind the picture of the sweep pushing his sooty old cart, as sooty as himself, along the high road between the hedges clothed with their bright young leaves, and before him there arose involuntary speculations as to the history of the person he had just been talking to.

The sweep was a man under middle size: he had no whiskers on his face, but his age was quite hidden under the thick coating of soot with which it was covered, and even on those Sundays when he washed himself and appeared

at church, the ingrained griminess of his face prevented any signs of age being visible; the villagers supposed him to be a man of nearly seventy years; but his age was a subject on which John was always silent, and so it was a matter of mere conjecture.

Mrs. Larchpole's luncheons were always very elegant entertainments; she prided herself upon them, and said she liked far better to meet her friends at luncheon than at dinner: "Not so formal, my dear Lizzie," she used to observe to Mrs. Perry. When the curate reached The Lawns he found there the curates of two neighbouring parishes, Mrs. Perry, and her two daughters, and Mr. Selton, a young Chancebridge doctor, who had lately succeeded to a practice which included nearly all the Warnton Kings families, and who already was a great favourite with those who had had occasion to call for his services.

Mrs. Larchpole was in one of her best humours to-day: she laughed and talked, and kept her friends continually amused with her experiences, until at length Mr. Winnersley came to think her one of the most charming women he had ever met with, while Mrs. Perry joined in the

conversation in her sharp quick manner, uttering observations on the subject in question, which, if not quite contradictions of what somebody had said, were certainly of a contradictory character. But Mrs. Perry was known to have a habit of disagreeing with the person with whom she was in conversation, and so her observations did not cause any remark : perhaps she thought that by this mode of action she was showing originality, for often all the claim that many people who think a good deal of themselves can lay to originality consists in contradicting what other people, who it may be are cleverer than they, have already said.

Miss Alicia Perry was very fond of being noticed, and nothing would she leave undone which a proper young lady could do to attract attention to herself; so following out her usual procedure, she favoured Mr. Winnersley with glances as decided as a young lady in her position could, and directed her attention in a great measure to him. By these means she succeeded in engrossing a large share of Mr. Winnersley's attention, but not enough to prevent him noticing what was going on around him. He was not long before he found out that

Mr. Selton much admired Miss Ellen Perry, while he fancied that Mr. Lindridge, the curate of Oakhanger, was also much attracted in the same direction. Ellen Perry was of a very different disposition from her sister: quiet and retiring, she made no effort to attract attention to herself, but received attention when paid to her in an unconscious matter-of-fact way which added in no small measure to her attractions.

Luncheon being over, the party separated, after a stroll round the grounds at The Lawns, which were looking very pretty under the early spring sunshine. Mr. Selton was the first to go, since he had some patients to visit who lived some distance away, and soon after the several clerical gentlemen departed to their neighbouring parishes, while Mrs. Perry and her daughters remained at The Lawns for the afternoon, by special invitation from Mrs. Larchpole.





CHAPTER V.

MR. PERRY ANSWERS AN ADVERTISEMENT.

PARSON PERRY never breakfasted before nine ; this was one thing about which he had always withstood his wife ; he said that he always had breakfasted at nine, and always should breakfast at nine ; and so he did, much to the dislike of both his wife and daughters, who were always down stairs by half-past eight, but who had never had the courage to commence open rebellion by having an independent breakfast for themselves at that hour, leaving the parson to take his morning meal in solitary state when it so pleased him.

At nine o'clock one morning, soon after the events related in the preceding chapter, the Rev.

Edward Perry was seated with his family round the breakfast table. It was Saturday morning, the morning on which the county paper arrived : whatever letters came were opened and discussed during breakfast, but the paper was allowed to remain unopened until the meal was ended, when Miss Lishey always seized upon it and took the first look.

Mr. Perry was parting with his gardener, who, by his conduct, seemed to be in the same way of thinking, so far as beer was concerned, with a certain celebrated negro who used to state that "too much was just enough;" and the gardener, in consequence, was often to be seen after having had what he thought "just enough." The "Midlandshire Chronicle," the county paper taken in by Mr. Perry, generally contained a column of advertisements of the better class of servants, and, therefore, this morning it was looked forward to with unusual interest to see if there was an advertisement in it at all likely to meet the requirements of Mr. Perry.

Breakfast being over, Miss Lishey made a rush at the paper, and quickly tearing away the wrapper, glanced over the advertisement column.

"Oh, papa," she exclaimed after a few seconds'

pause, "I think there is one that is the very thing; listen :—Gardener, a respectable young man requires a situation as gardener; thoroughly understands his business; address J. L., care of Henry Lastey, nurseryman, Chancebridge!—Don't you think it sounds well?"

"Yes; I think it sounds well, Lishey," answered the parson, doubtfully, perhaps having before his mind the fact that the descriptions of persons and things in advertisements very often in no way correspond with the persons and things themselves.

"I think, my dear, it sounds very well," said Mrs. Perry decidedly, as if no doubt at all was present in her mind; "you ought to answer the advertisement at once," continued she, addressing her husband.

"Let me look at it, Lishey dear," said the parson, stretching out his hand for the paper, which Lishey gave him. He read the advertisement over to himself, and afterwards said, in a very deliberate manner, "Yes, he ought to be written to."

The Reverend Edward Perry very much disliked letter writing, and especially writing such letters as the one now required—an answer

to an advertisement. In fact, he used to put off writing until the last minute, and sometimes, indeed, until the last minute was past, and so the letter never got written. This failing of his was well known in his family, and so when he said "he must be written to," all knew that he did not mean that he would write himself, but that his daughter Ellen, who voluntarily took upon herself the office of secretary to her father, would write for him. Miss Nellie then, hearing what her father had said, remarked, "I will write for you, papa, if you are too much engaged."

"Thank you, Nellie," said Mr. Perry, "I should be so much obliged if you would."

"What shall I say, papa?" asked Ellen, going forthwith to a small escritoire which stood by one of the breakfast-room windows.

"Ask him to come over one day next week," broke in Mrs. Perry. "What day will it suit you, Edward?" continued she, addressing her husband.

"I thought Wednesday would be a good day," said Mr. Perry. The parson, when questioned by his wife, or asked by her to fix any time, generally began in a doubtful, half apologising

manner, using the words "I thought," seeming to consider "I think" far too decided ; while by using the words "I thought," he threw the decision upon his wife by a species of implied question.

Mrs. Perry, on the other hand, seldom thought at all, but decided at once, perhaps having learnt to do so the more readily since she had always decided for her husband as well as for herself. So she agreed at once that Wednesday would be a very suitable day for the visit of the advertiser.

Ellen Perry then wrote a letter to J. L. at Mr. Lastey's, saying that the Reverend Edward Perry, of Warnton Kings, was in want of a gardener, and that he would be glad if J. L. would come over from Chancebridge and see him on Wednesday next ; and in due course an answer came back signed James Loyton, saying that he would walk over on that day, and hoping that his recommendations would prove satisfactory.

On the day fixed James Loyton appeared at Warnton Vicarage, and after being talked to for ten minutes by Mr. Perry, and for twenty minutes by Mrs. Perry, and then left to himself

for another ten minutes, whilst he and his sayings were talked over by the Perry family in solemn conclave assembled, he was unanimously pronounced all that could be desired, and was informed by Mrs. Perry that if his character from Mr. Lastey as to experience and behaviour was good, he was to consider himself engaged, and she added that Mr. Perry and herself would drive over to Chancebridge that day and see Mr. Lastey.

Mr. Lastey gave James Loyton a very good character, and the consequence was that in about three weeks' time he was established at Warnton Kings Vicarage as gardener.

Loyton was a good-looking working man, about five-and-twenty years of age, and yet, nevertheless, he had a superior look about him, which gave perhaps additional force to the common saying that he was next heir to Warnton Court. Mr. Perry, of course, had not forgotten the rumours concerning him whilst he was engaging him, since they were openly talked of in the parish; but as he utterly disbelieved them, neither he nor Mrs. Perry saw any objection to having him in their service, considering, no doubt, that it would be unwise to give up a

man who promised to be a first-rate gardener merely because he happened to have a mystery attached to him.

Great was the sensation caused in the village by James Loyton's engagement at the Vicarage, and many were the conversations it gave rise to in the "Warnton Arms" bar-parlour, and great were the differences of opinion amongst the village worthies upon the subject. Joe Dorman with his usual sharpness was not long before he found out that there must be something in it, and all sorts of motives, of all degrees of deepness, were attributed to Loyton; while the true state of the case, that he had come without any regard to the rumours concerning his pretensions, merely to fill the place of gardener to the vicar, met with no support. The fact was that his father had had no belief in, and had rarely given a thought to, his supposed prospective claims, and young Loyton himself thought no more of coming to a situation in Warnton Kings, than he would have done of going to a place fifty miles away.

The vicar and his family naturally felt great curiosity as to their new gardener, and one day whilst Loyton was planting out the geraniums on

the lawn, the vicar came up to him with the intention of finding out the truth of the matter.

"Loyton," he said, "is there any truth in these rumours I hear about you in the village?"

"Well, yes, sir," answered Loyton, just pausing to press down the earth round a plant, and then standing up, "perhaps there is, but I don't think much about it myself."

"How did you hear of it?" asked the parson.

"Why, we've always known something about it," said Loyton; "my father when he was living used to tell me about it, and a lawyer in Chancebridge, Mr. Sleight, has often come and asked a lot of questions, and has put down the answers, and said that he should like to know more than we could tell him."

"Would you mind telling me about it, Loyton?"

"Not at all, sir," he answered, "but I don't think it will interest you very much. You see there were two Miss Warntons a long time ago, who married against the wishes of the family, and were cast off, but whether they were sisters or cousins I can't well say. Well, one of them married a Loyton, who was a poor curate without any money of his own, who died in a few years,

leaving her with three little children and very poor. She was my grandfather's mother. Well, by the help of a few friends, she started a little shop, and brought her children up honestly, but what could she do more? She had no money for them, so they were obliged to work; my grandfather, her eldest son, was very fond of gardening, and came to Chancebridge, it may be to be near Warnton Kings: my father was a gardener too, and he has often told me about his relationship to the Warntons. You see I am what the lawyer called the representative of that Miss Warnton that married a Loyton, and he said as well that if there was no descendant of the other lady alive, there would be no doubt about it, for then I should certainly be the next heir."

"Do you know anything about her?" asked Mr. Perry.

"No, sir; no more than that she married about the same time as the other Miss Warnton. I have heard that she eloped with a Chancebridge tradesman's son, who thought he was going to do a good piece of business by marrying a Warnton. But the family would have nothing to do with her either, so she and her husband left the neighbourhood, and no one now knows

anything about her ; so we can't tell if she has left any descendants or not, and that is just where Lawyer Sleight is at fault."

" Why, Loyton," exclaimed the parson, unguardedly, and with the remembrance of the Squire's determination to make no will fresh on his mind, " I think you have a very good chance of getting the estate after the death of the Squire."

" Well, I don't think much of it, sir," answered he, " you see there may be lots of people with a greater claim to it than I have, and I daresay they would soon be found if they were looked for."

" I suppose you have your registers of births and so on perfect ?" remarked Mr. Perry.

" Oh, yes, I have most of them, or know where to find them," replied Loyton ; " the lawyer looked at them and said they were all right, and that the only doubt was about the other Miss Warnton." After saying this he recommenced planting his flowers, as if to intimate that he had told all he knew.

" Well," said the parson, turning away, " thank you for telling me ; and all I can say is this, that many a person would be glad to be in your position."

"Very likely, sir," answered the gardener ;
"many a one there is who would like even the
chance of bettering himself."

The parson walked slowly across the lawn to the Vicarage, thinking over what had been told him by Loyton, and that a very slight move of fortune's wheel might place his gardener at Warnton Court as its owner. Entering the house he heard his wife's voice in the breakfast room, and so, like a good and proper husband, he hastened to tell her all that he knew himself. His wife and daughters listened attentively to his narrative, and after he had finished his wife said,

"Then there is something in the village talk this time, but village talk is not always to be depended upon."

"No, indeed, it is not," answered Mr. Perry ;
"but it seems to me that young Loyton really is next heir to the Squire."

"It is just possible it may be so," said Mrs. Perry, "but it cannot be said so for certain until all is known about the elder sister, or cousin, or whoever she was, whether she left any children ; and then, how does anybody know, after all, that he Squire won't make a will ?"

"No one can be sure that he won't, but I

think from the conversation I had with him some little time ago, that he certainly will not; and if he does not do so, then, of course, the man that could prove himself next of kin would get his property," said the parson.

"I consider that Loyton is very right, not to think seriously about the matter," said his wife; "there seem to me so many chances between him and the Court. In fact," she continued, rapidly coming to a decision upon the subject in question, "I don't believe he has any chance of the property at all."

"He tells me that Jeremiah Sleight says he has."

"And what does he know about it?"

"He has seen his papers."

"Well, I don't think Sleight will do him any good. He is a bad man."

"But he knows when a man's papers show a claim to property, my dear."

"And I know when common sense shows that he hasn't, without papers or anything else."

The parson saw that his wife's mind was made up, and he knew that it would be no good further combating her views, so he said deprecatingly, "Do you think he has no chance,

Elizabeth? Well, perhaps he hasn't." To this conversation Alicia and Nellie listened in silence.

Jeremiah Sleight was a man past middle age, and his hair was already grey. He was possessed of a pale and colourless face, on the lips of which there was always a smile, though the smile seldom or never extended to his small and somewhat closely set-together grey eyes. The cheeks were large and round, but died away sharply both above and below into a narrow forehead and small chin; and they were fringed with a sparse scattering of grey hairs which thickened into a tuft just at the point of his chin, but which could hardly be dignified at any part of their course with the name of either whiskers or beard.

Mr. Jeremiah Sleight had by some means or other gained for himself a bad character, though no one knew any thing actually bad about him. He had very comfortable offices in Chancebridge, well furnished with books and papers, for he had a great deal of business to do of a certain kind; but his character for sharpness, earned no one knew how, but which had accrued to him as slowly and as surely and as imperceptibly as the continual dropping of lime water will in-

crease the stalactite, though each drop of water be apparently innocent in itself, caused all the more respectable people to fight shy of his offices. He did not, however, live at his offices; he lodged at a small house in the outskirts of the town, where he carried on another favourite pursuit of his, when he had reached home after office hours, and had left the law behind him in Chancebridge. This pursuit was genealogy.

And I think I may as well say at once that public opinion was not wrong in his case, when it regarded him with some degree of suspicion, for he was given to benefiting first himself, and then his clients, whenever he possibly could, though he was extremely careful to keep within the letter of the law in any little self-advantageous business he might have on hand. And it was for his own advantage that he studied genealogy, and in this business of Loyton's it seemed probable that his knowledge of the subject would be serviceable to him. Since the death of the Squire's son, he had thought it worth while to seek out Loyton, and hear what he had to say about himself; and now he was looking up the Loyton and Warnton pedigrees, after having received Loyton's signature to a written paper

which he said contained his promise to give him his business when he came into the estate, and which paper Loyton the more readily signed, without any scrutiny of its contents, as he himself thought so little of his prospects.





CHAPTER VI.

THE CURATE MAKES AN ACQUAINTANCE.



THE village of Oakhanger was distant about two miles from Warnton Kings: the road was down hill the whole way. A stream whose sources were amongst the neighbouring hills, ran through the valley in which Oakhanger was situated, and on a rising bank, half encircled by the stream, stood Oakhanger Church, embowered in limes and firs, and with its porch half hidden by an ancient yew, whose gnarled boughs and sombre branches stood out in marked contrast to the grey stone of the church. In fact the whole village was situated in the midst of tall trees and woodland scenery. The rector of Oakhanger was now an old man, and though he still

resided at the Rectory, and preached a sermon occasionally, he left the chief duties of his position to his curate, Mr. Lindridge. Mr. Lindridge on coming to the parish had found the church sadly out of repair, and therefore had directed all his energies towards collecting enough money for its restoration; success had crowned his efforts, and the restoration had now been just completed. The village choir before this had sung to the strains of an harmonium, but now a new organ had taken its place, and a new organist had been sought to play it, for the person who had played the harmonium was quite unequal to the new instrument.

The new organist was a young lady by name Emily Crookenden, the only child of her mother, who was the widow of a clergyman, and who on her husband's death had been left with a very moderate pittance. Her daughter Emily had a great talent for music, and was very proficient on both organ and piano, and on her father's death she resolved to add to her mother's means by making use of her musical talent, and so, hearing of the vacancy for an organist at Oakhanger, she applied for it, and succeeded in obtaining the appointment. Her mother had taken a

pretty little cottage near the church, and lived there with her daughter. Emily Crookenden was a tall slight girl of about five and twenty years, with wavy light brown hair and blue eyes : not by any means pretty, but not the less attractive because wanting in absolute beauty, for her manner had a charm which would have given grace even to downright plainness.

The Reverend Herbert Lindridge, after seeing Mr. Winnersley at Mrs. Larchpole's, called upon him at his lodgings, and then discovering that Mr. Winnersley was very fond of music, and had some knowledge of the organ, asked him to come and take luncheon with him some day, and hear the Oakhanger choir practice, and Miss Crookenden play.

"I can promise you a treat," said Mr. Lindridge, "I am sorry to say that I don't know much about music myself, but I can tell what I think good, and Miss Crookenden plays some very good things, to my thinking; however, come and tell me what your idea is. I know enough to know that the last organist we had was not first-rate, and had not much idea of fitting tunes to hymns, for only last Epiphany we had a very pretty tune to 'Brightest and best of the sons

of the morning,' and the very next Sunday we had the same tune to a common-measure hymn ; you can imagine what a mess the choir made of it, leave alone the congregation. The singing goes ever so much better under the new management."

So Mr. Winnersley walked over to Oakhanger, and was duly introduced to Miss Crookenden, and duly admired the precision with which her collection of rough-headed school boys, whose appearance at their week-day practice was very different from that on a Sunday morning, when all their imperfections were covered with white surplices, went through their various exercises, and also the facility with which Miss Crookenden mastered the most complicated succession of notes, and made the deep bass pedals respond to her flying feet. . .

After dismissing the choir-boys, who, by the speed which they used in fetching their caps and rushing out of the church, and by the noise they made as soon as they were well out of the churchyard, seemed much to prefer liberty to singing, Miss Crookenden closed the organ, and proceeded to her home, accompanied on her way by the two clergymen. During the short time it

took to reach Miss Crookenden's home, the conversation turned chiefly upon music, and since Mr. Lindridge did not feel himself qualified to give many opinions on the subject, it was chiefly carried on by Mr. Winnersley and the organist, who soon found out that many of their views coincided, and became greatly interested in their discussion. But the end of the walk soon came, and bidding Miss Crookenden good-bye, the clergymen walked back to Mr. Lindridge's abode, and cigars and wine were produced. After some little time, Mr. Winnersley, whose thoughts were still filled with music, asked Mr. Lindridge who the new organist was, and what was known of her. Mr. Lindridge told him all he knew, adding that she was very well received in the neighbourhood, and that everybody felt great sympathy and respect for her. "For her mother," he continued, "is a great invalid, and rarely comes outside the house, in fact, I think she is nearly always confined to her room, and I hear that her daughter is devoted to her, and spends hours in reading to her."

"What a trial it must be to her that her mother is such an invalid!" observed Mr. Winnersley.

"It must indeed," said Mr. Lindridge, "and she is away a good deal too, for she has many pupils in the neighbourhood, and they take up much of her time; but there is an old servant who has been with them a long time who stays with Mrs. Crookenden when her daughter is away."

"They must be poorly off," said Mr. Winnersley.

"Yes, they are," answered Mr. Lindridge, "but Miss Crookenden is able to procure many luxuries for her mother with what she gets from her profession. Their old servant, although she is very fond of her mistress, is also fond of a little bit of gossip, and by that means all that is known of them got abroad, and I don't think their servant herself knows much more, or most likely the village would know it too."

"The villagers very frequently know more of a person than that person knows of himself," said Mr. Winnersley; "if you want to know what you are going to do you have only to ask a village gossip."

"Your parishioners just now are much exercised in mind about old Squire Warnton, are they not?" asked Mr. Lindridge.

"Yes, but I have not been at Warnton long enough to quite understand the truth of the matter; they say an old sweep, by name John Pilgrimson, knows more about it than he cares to tell, but perhaps that is because no one knows anything about him. Mystery generally begets authority, you know."

"I was once in the Island of Skye," said Mr. Lindridge, after a short pause, "and at the hotel at which I was staying meals were provided for the whole of the visitors at certain hours. I was up early one morning, and, after a long walk, came in very hungry an hour before the fixed time for breakfast. I represented the state of the case to a grey-haired old Scotsman who acted as waiter, and asked him to let me have my breakfast then; but he shook his head, and said, 'Weel, ye'll no be sae hungry but ye can wait;' and I had to wait. I have never forgotten the man's words: however much we may want to solve a mystery, we must wait; all mysteries will be solved some day, all things that are good for us will be ours at some future time; but for that time we must wait patiently. But how do you like your parish, Winnersley?"

"Very much indeed," he answered, "and it

will be my fault entirely if I don't make myself very happy there. In the first place, it is a lovely parish, with its green hills and shady valleys; and then, what I have seen of the villagers, I like very much. What a nice person Mrs. Larchpole is."

"Yes, she is," answered Mr. Lindridge, "she always impresses a stranger very favourably, and I must say that in this case first impressions do not get weaker as you know more of her. She is very kind to the poor people, and does more for them than people know of."

"And does not think that though 'we are of one flesh after all, and need one flannel,' there need be any 'proper sense of difference in the quality,' like Aurora Leigh's aunt," said Mr. Winnersley, with a smile.

"No, indeed, I think she is truly charitable," responded Mr. Lindridge; "but her friendship with Mrs. Perry is a great source of amusement in the neighbourhood."

"I heard of that before I had been many days in the parish," observed Mr. Winnersley.

"She is very kind to us poor curates too," continued Lindridge, "we are always welcome there. I was much amused some time ago by

hearing a gentleman declare his intention of calling upon her on Sundays, that the clerical gentlemen might be engaged upon their duties when he went there."

"What a selfish man he must have been," said Mr. Winnersley, "and I should think no admirer of the cloth."

Upon this the conversation turned upon matters clerical, and after a short time Mr. Winnersley intimated that it was time for him to start back to Warnton Kings.

It was early evening as he walked back from Oakhanger to his own village. The road was for some distance cut through a red sand-stone rock, and the banks on each side were crowned with large elms and spreading oaks, and their sides half covered with creeping brambles and bushy hazels, whilst in all the crevices grew blue speedwell and white chickweed, and many flowers that were awaiting the warm summer sun before they opened their petals to the breeze. The declining sun gleamed between the tree trunks, and lay in bright patches on the opposite bank, and enough breeze was stirring to drown the busy hum of the newly awakened insects in the tender fluttering of the young spring leaves. Up this

road paced Irwin Winnersley, his thoughts holding high carnival, and as inconsequent as the gentle breeze, which blew where it listed. Did he think of the time when, perhaps, he should be master of a country rectory, bowered in trees, it may be like the rectory at Warnton Kings? Ay, perchance he did, and it may be peopled it with a loving wife and curly-headed youngsters, gamboling on the lawn, and wakening the leafy walks with their shouts. And then again came across him Lindridge's saying, "Ye'll no be sae hungry but ye can wait." Then his thoughts wandered to Oakhanger, and from Oakhanger to its choir, and from its choir to its organist. And then it suddenly, like a flash, broke upon him that the organist bore a great resemblance to the wife he had pictured sitting by his open window, looking out upon his green lawn, and watching his children romping on the grass. And then he rebelled against the thought, and asked himself what reason he had to dream such day-dreams; he had only once seen Emily Crookenden, and by what strange means could such ideas find their way into his brain? But, nevertheless, there they were, and all his efforts could not banish them. Then he began to consider his

position in the world, and to reckon up his income to see if it would warrant only the thought of his marriage in some future far-away time. But no, it was very little he had to depend upon; the younger son of a poor country squire, it was all his father could do to provide enough for his eldest son to live in a style befitting so old a name, without supplying fortunes for his younger sons also; they were given good educations and sent out into the world to make their way or fail; little help would they get in either case from home. So all he was worth was a very few pounds a year, which he received from part of his mother's fortune, and his curacy, which indeed, though amply sufficient for a bachelor, would hardly maintain the increased expenses of a wife. And then he argued with himself, that all this vision of rectory and wife and children, was merely a wild dream, and that all he thought of Miss Crookenden was that she would make a charming wife, without referring this wife particularly to himself. But no, his inner consciousness defeated his arguments, and forced upon him the conviction, that however improbable it might be or however distant it might be, he had really thought of her as his own wife.

And so he walked on up the long hill between the shrubby banks, with his head bent to the ground, and now and then striking with his stick at the loose stone or the jutting bramble. A sudden turn of the road, however, brought full before him the verdant slopes of the neighbouring hills, dotted with clumps of dusky pines, and green at their base with cultivated fields, whilst over all the now fast-declining sun sent a golden sheen. Away to the right, half-way up the slope of the hill, he saw the grey front of Warnton Court, peeping from amongst its trees; whilst half way between himself and the Court could be seen a train of carts, slowly wending their way along the Chancebridge road, and bearing the black coal from the mining district close at hand to the rural country beyond Warnton; and the shouts of the carters and the cracking of their whips floated to him on the light breeze.

It was a fair scene, and in spite of himself it forced him from his meditations; so he quickened his steps, and before the sun had wholly set, he had reached his lodgings at Warnton Kings.



CHAPTER VII.

HOW ALICIA PERRY BEHAVES.



LICIA PERRY was a young lady of genteel taste, that is, she possessed great admiration for all that was above her, either in rank or wealth. Sometimes all the knowledge of rank and wealth that people have is gained from "Burke" or other kindred works, which they have consulted because it is genteel to do so. These people rejoice if they get a chance, by coming across a name in a newspaper, or in conversation, of saying in the hearing of as many people as possible, "Oh, Lord A. is the Duke of B.'s son;" or, "Let me see, did not the Earl of C. marry Sir D. E.'s daughter?" This gives them, they think, an air of what they call gen-

tility, and shows people that they at least have some acquaintance with the peerage; but their audience does not see the well-thumbed "Debrett" or "Burke" at home. What is the meaning of the word "genteel?" Nothing but the quality that anything has of looking more than it is; a word that has a near relation extremely like it in features and in meaning, namely, "veneer." Both are members of a family of shams, a family which flourishes vigorously in the present day, but their near relationship would be strenuously disputed by genteel people.

I don't say that Alicia Perry or her mother carried their admiration of title to the extent just mentioned, but certain it is that both had great reverence for wealth and position. We have seen how Mrs. Perry was disappointed, and therefore to a certain extent grieved, at the death of young Warnton; and Alicia, who not only was in no manner blind to young Warnton's shy glances, but did her very best, within due bounds, to encourage them, also felt his sad end to be a great disappointment; for she had really cherished, in some quiet corner, the hope of being one day Mrs. Warnton. Alicia thought how nice it would be to be able to look round on her

acquaintances or people she happened to be near, and say to herself, "I am somebody, these are nobodies; I am Mrs. Warnton, of Warnton Court;" while at the same time she was in no way dull to the advantages of carriages and diamonds and all the other luxuries that wealth can buy.

Time, however, who by his unceasing presence soothes and softens all things, afforded her his usual forgetfulness, and the remembrance of her wild desire had already grown dim and receded to some seldom-opened casket in her heart, when the engagement of James Loyton as her father's gardener revived the dormant dream. Was it possible that he was next heir to Warnton Court? She had listened to all her father had said while telling Loyton's story, and had heard her mother decide against his chance of succeeding to the property; but although generally guided by her mother's decisions, she had not this time given her unqualified adherence to her opinion. The mere fact of his relationship to the Squire gave him some importance in her eyes, and this was added to by his chance of succeeding to the estate. Day by day as she saw him working before her window, or met him

in the garden, the thought of his expectations arose before her. A girl by no means accustomed to recognize circumstances that were adverse to her, she gradually came to think that her mother must be wrong, and that at least he must have a good chance of the Warnton property. And then she looked at him still more attentively, and each time she looked at him dispelled one of her doubts and made her still more confident that he was the right man. And so in course of time she dismissed her last remaining mis-giving, and he was ever present before her as the next heir to Warnton Court.

Early summer had now passed away. The rhododendrons had put forth their purple flower-balls round the Vicarage ponds, had lasted for a brief space, and then had faded; the roses, too, had scattered their perfume to the summer breeze, and their beauty was waning, supplanted, but not surpassed, by the gaudy brilliancy of the scarlet geraniums and blue lobelias. James Loyton had been at the Vicarage for more than three months, and had acquitted himself greatly to the satisfaction of Mr. Perry, for his lawns had never been smoother, nor his flower-beds gayer than they were this summer. And Loyton

pleased him, too, because of his quiet manner, and the neatness and handiness with which he went about his work. He was by no means a bad-looking man, and his appearance was certainly above his station in life; beneath the surface, however, a close observer might have seen that he was not unconscious of his good looks, but still he never appeared to think either of himself or of his expectations; and, indeed, devoted himself rather to improving himself in his profession than to dreaming of what might happen to him in future times. The excitement which had been raised by his appearance in the village had now died away, and if any suspicion at all remained, it was in Joe Dorman's expansive breast, who at times reverted to the old story, and declared himself not satisfied; but he had been once or twice so severely snubbed by Sam Cleaver and Cross the clerk, that it began to glimmer in his dull head that if he again openly put forth his ideas, he would run great risk of losing what reputation for worldly wisdom he was possessed of, and so he discreetly kept silence. Besides, now was the busy time at the Warnton Arms; excursionists kept coming in great numbers from the neighbouring district,

and not unfrequently stayed late at the inn, so that the evening confabulations of the village worthies were put off until the shortening days and chilly autumn winds had checked the flow of pleasure-seekers, and so Joe had not that opportunity of impressing his superior knowledge on his fellow-villagers which he had in the quieter seasons of the year.

By this time Alicia had become quite convinced of the certainty of Loyton's claims, and these months had not passed away without frequent conversations on the subject between herself and Loyton. These conversations, at first commenced by a common-place inquiry about Loyton's mother, who still resided at Chancebridge, and was advancing in years, or by an observation as to the beauty of this plant or the faded appearance of that, at length grew longer and far more interesting to Miss Perry, since, not satisfied with her father's account, she questioned Loyton herself about his family and his relationship to the Squire. Nor did what she heard from him at all weaken her belief. Although he himself thought his claims far outweighed by the adverse chances, she considered the adverse chances of very little moment in comparison with

the certain fact of his relationship ; and although she said as much to him, still she purposely said it in so light a manner that he had no idea that her mind was so fully made up, neither did she care that he should know it.

James Loyton was not unaware that Miss Perry sought his company with increasing frequency, and that she stayed longer in conversation with him time after time. Being, as I have said, inwardly conscious of his good looks, it dawned upon him by degrees, that the vicar's daughter sought him for the pleasure she took in his company. He was by no means blind to the personal charms of Miss Perry, but it was long before he dared to look up at her, or cease from his work while she was present. Her fine figure, her face with a suspicion of boldness in its features, and her manner, a trifle forward, were just the attributes to attract a man in Loyton's position, and he began to think that he must have made some impression upon her, and therefore he allowed himself to become more familiar in his manner to her. Now, up to this time Alicia had been in a manner blind to the good looks of Loyton himself, and her only reason for seeking him had been her interest in

him as one who some day might be much advanced in worldly position. She did not notice his increasing familiarity, nor the increasing boldness of the glances he cast upon her, and so she still frequently stopped to talk to him, more frequently, perhaps, than she would have done, had she been wider awake to his demeanour towards her when she was with him.

The lime-trees—always first to lose their leaves in early autumn—had begun to strew the lime avenue with their yellow foliage, and as the vicar objected to see the faded leaves on his favourite walk, it was one of Loyton's duties in the autumn time to keep it free from these tokens of the waning year. Engaged one day in sweeping the further end of this long lime avenue, which formed the boundary on one side of the Vicarage, Loyton observed Miss Perry coming towards him. A man in himself not forward, but still possessing a large share of self-admiration, he could not but be flattered by the evident alacrity with which she hastened down the avenue. She, indeed, was bent on elucidating some point in his history which had come across her, and by no means considered the meaning which her evident eagerness might convey to

him. She was soon in conversation with him, not in the least noticing the attitude of mingled respect and familiarity in which he stood, allowing his eyes to rest upon her while he ceased from his work and listened to her. They were thus so mutually intent—the one on her question, the other on his questioner—that neither noticed Mrs. Perry, who having come down a side-walk was now standing in the avenue not ten yards distant. The sigh of the wind in the branches of the trees had deadened the sound of her footsteps, and as neither looked towards her, she stood there some seconds without discovery. During those few seconds she took in the whole situation, and fully understood the danger in which her daughter was. Her first impulse was to rush up and snatch her daughter away from Loyton; but before she could put her impulse into action, a sickening fear came over her lest her ambitious schemes for her favourite child were going to be blotted out; and her knees failed her, and with staggering steps she turned again into the walk she had just left. Anger, however, soon brought back her strength, and she stood deliberating on the course she ought to take. At last prudence gained the victory over anger,

and she retired by the way she came, thinking that by a present demonstration of her feelings, she would run greater risk of raising up an antagonism in her daughter which might ruin her hopes, than by a quiet talk with her after the heat of her anger had subsided; but she miscalculated her power of keeping down her vexation. So she retired into the house and awaited her daughter's return; nor had she long to wait, for when Miss Lishey's curiosity was satisfied as to the point in question, she at once returned, walking slowly across the lawn, quite unconscious that her meeting with Loyton had been observed.

Although Mrs. Perry had shown such discretion in retiring when she discovered her daughter, she made a mistake as soon as she saw her come into the house, for she rang the bell and asked the servant to tell Miss Alicia that she wanted to speak to her. It had been a great restraint not to speak when she first discovered her, and now that she had collected her thoughts and come to her decision, she could brook no delay. Alicia, when she answered her mother's summons, had no idea of the cause of it, but entered her mother's little room—which

was both dressing-room and sitting-room—in the most unsuspecting manner. Mrs. Perry, who although outwardly calm, had hardly quelled her anger, began at once on the subject which filled her thoughts.

“Alicia, my dear, you have been down the lime avenue, have you not?”

“Yes, mamma,” said Lishy, not suspecting what was coming, for indeed it had never yet struck her that she was doing wrong in her frequent conversations with Loyton.

“I saw you there, my dear, talking to Loyton,” said Mrs. Perry.

“Yes, I was asking him something about his father, mamma,” answered Alicia quietly. Now this quiet and unsuspecting answer should have convinced Mrs. Perry that things were not so bad as she had expected, and that at all events Alicia was not knowingly doing wrong, and that a few words of gentle warning would have effected her purpose better than a scolding, but it did not do so, and Mrs. Perry went on, her internal anger rising nearer to the surface, since perhaps she believed she saw defiance instead of innocence in Lishy’s quiet behaviour.

“I do not wish my daughter to be seen talking

to the gardener in that familiar manner," said Mrs. Perry sharply.

And then it suddenly broke upon Miss Alicia that she had been sent for to be scolded, and although in her heart of hearts she began to think that she had been imprudent, she began (instead of being sorry) to harden her heart and defend herself.

"I am not familiar with the gardener," said she in an injured tone.

"If other people besides myself had seen you, they would have said you were," said Mrs. Perry, "and I don't wish my daughter to be talked about in the parish."

Alicia began to remember Loyton's demeanour towards her, and the way in which she had sometimes observed him looking at her. Strange, she thought, that she had not noticed it before. There was no doubt that he was to a certain extent familiar in his manner towards her, but she would not let her mother see that she had now discovered it, so she maintained her injured tone, and answered,—

"I was not aware that it was wrong to speak to our gardener. He is always perfectly respectful to me."

"That may be, Alicia," replied Mrs. Perry, "and most probably is the case ; but I was very shocked at what I saw this afternoon—it led me to believe that you understood each other better than you say."

"My dear mamma, how could you imagine there could be anything between me and James Loyton ?" exclaimed Alicia passionately.

"I am glad to find it is not as I thought," said Mrs. Perry, whose anger and vexation had subsided now that she found that she was mistaken. "And I hope that you will be more careful in future, Lishey."

"Pray do not think that I can at any time lower myself to think of James Loyton otherwise than as gardener," said Alicia haughtily ; and then she rose, and receiving her mother's permission to retire, she went to her own room, and, sitting down in her little easy chair, began to think over what had passed.





CHAPTER VIII.

ALICIA TAKES FURTHER STEPS.

MRS. PERRY told her husband what she had seen, and what she had said to Alicia about it, and even if he thought she had been a little too hasty in taxing Alicia with it as she had, he did not say so, knowing that his wife usually placed her own opinion before his. However, he so far, outwardly at least, agreed with his wife as to say,

“Perhaps we had better discharge Loyton.”

“No, I don’t think that is necessary,” answered his wife. “Alicia was most indignant when I spoke to her, and I think she will be more careful in future.”

“I should be sorry to send him away,” said

the parson; "he is a very good gardener, and suits us very well."

"Yes, he does," assented his wife; but she added sharply, "common sense must lead you to see, that if it were necessary, we must sacrifice our garden to the interests of the family. Just think what a disgrace it would be even if she were to get talked about."

"I think all will go on well now; I don't expect Alicia will disregard your words."

"I hope she will not; but you know she is very self-willed, and it is hard to get an idea out of her head when once it is fixed there: but I hope she will now see her error."

"Indeed, I hope so too," said Mr. Perry.

"At all events, I shall keep a good look-out," said his wife, "and if I see anything that ought not to be, we must then send Loyton away."

And with this the conversation ended. Whatsoever beside Mr. Perry thought, he did not give expression to in words, but that he was thinking was evident by the steady way he gazed into the fire, and by the length of time he remained in the same position in his chair.

He was a man who had a decided tinge of selfishness in his character—perhaps that charac-

teristic had been fostered by the way in which he was looked after by his wife, and he was also rather lazy in disposition. He was very fond of saying "This will do for me," quite forgetting that what would do for him might be a source of great annoyance to his wife and daughter, or to those persons in whose company he might happen to be. And herein I think many people err, especially those whose delight is not to do as others do. They may please themselves, but that is not the first object of life. The first object of life is to be as great a source of pleasure and comfort to those with whom you are placed by Providence, as you can be, and those people I have in my mind forget the pain they cause by their, it may be, very trifling habits of eccentricity to those who are bound to them by every tie of affection.

Miss Perry was not long before she realized the fact that she had been too familiar with James Loyton. She herself had not had any idea of it, but she saw the inference which he might draw from her so frequently seeking his company; but when she did realize it, her repentance was not very deep. Why should she not talk to Loyton—Loyton, the next heir to

Warnton Court; Loyton, who would some day be not only her equal, but above her in social position? Why was it such an enormity that her mother must, forsooth, ring the bell for her, and scold her like a school-girl? Soon—how soon she did not know—her mother might be courting Loyton's acquaintance as the Squire, and then, indeed, her inner consciousness told her that her mother would find no fault with any amount of familiarity between him and herself; nay, she would rather encourage it, as Lishy imagined she had already encouraged a scarcely evident fancy of young Warnton's, hoping that her daughter would one day be mistress of the Court. And what was she now doing, even if she had been familiar with the gardener, except paving the way for a still closer familiarity with her when her expectations about him were realized? Perhaps her mother did not think that Loyton had any chance of succeeding to the property; but with all due respect to her mother, what effect could her ideas have on his chances, and was not she herself quite certain on this point?

Then she turned her thoughts towards the man himself. He was a decidedly good-looking fellow, thought she, and he would make a good-looking

Squire—at all events, he would not be below his position as far as looks went. And besides, he was very pleasant to talk to, he had a kind of admiring deference in his manner, and his voice was very good and soft. And she would talk to him if she chose; why should she not talk to whom she liked without being scolded by her mother—surely she was old enough to know right from wrong? Then she began to wonder, with a woman's curiosity, which is often called forth in cases such as this, even when the object is below serious consideration, whether Loyton really admired her. Remembering his behaviour in her presence, she thought he did, and admiration is never utterly despised by women. There is something of a soothing nature in the admiration offered to a woman, which seems to soften down the points of her anger, and prevents her from being so entirely indignant as perhaps she ought to be. And so Alicia Perry was not very much displeased with the thought that James Loyton admired her, especially considering what that admiration might lead to in future years. But yet this admiration of his must not be encouraged, but must be kept in due bounds, though it must not be entirely extinguished. So per-

haps it would be as well if she did not see him so often ; and yet, what harm would there be in it, so that she was very careful not to let him know her motives ? Yes, she would still sometimes see him, for might he not some day be master, and she mistress, of Warnton Court ? Therefore it would be to her interest to make Loyton feel such a liking for her now, that on his elevation it might want but little encouragement to deepen into love. But she would not think of it any more now, but go and find her sister Ellen, and ask her to come for a walk with her, for she felt that a good blow on the hills would do more towards setting straight her conflicting ideas than hours of pondering in her small room.

Nellie was very ready to accompany her sister in her ramble, as indeed she was at any time to meet her most lightly expressed wish. Nellie was very fond of her sister, a fondness which was perhaps not returned by Alicia in its entirety, since she was too apt to make people useful to her, and her sister sometimes suffered from her selfishness, Ellen's very unconsciousness saving her from the perception of the off-hand manner in which her sister treated her ; and although she did not at all times fall in with her sister's high-

flown notions, still they in no way lessened her love towards her.

Warnton Vicarage was situated on one side of a large open space where two roads crossed, one leading from the Chancebridge road, and continuing up between the hills, and the other a lane which, running for some distance parallel with the high road, but at a higher level, joined it at either end. On the opposite side of this space was the church, a large structure, massively built, but with no pretensions to architectural beauty, its large square tower forming a picturesque object from many parts of the Vicarage grounds.

The vicar was leaning on his drive gate, talking to Cross, the clerk, when his daughters came down the road from the hills alongside the churchyard, and opposite to him. He had just finished his little talk with his wife, and in strolling out of the house up his drive, he happened to see Cross passing, so he stopped him to talk about some church matters ; however, when he saw his daughters approaching, he dismissed the clerk and walked slowly back with them up to the house.

“By the way, Lishey,” said he, “Cross tells me that the Squire is much worse ; the coachman

told them at the Warnton Arms that the doctor had been sent for in great haste, but Cross did not know whether it was dangerous or not. I shall go up to-morrow and inquire—it is too late to do so to-day.”

“I am so sorry for him,” said Nellie, “it must be so lonely for him in that great house, without anybody but the servants around him.”

“Yes, it is very sad,” said Lishey, but without going on to express the train of thought passing through her mind. Suppose the Squire should die, as at any time he might do now, then Loyton, her admirer, would be Squire. She was, indeed, sorry for Ralph Warnton as a man, but not as the Squire, considered in relation to Loyton. But she said no more, and followed Mr. Perry and her sister into the house.

The next morning the parson went up to the Court to inquire after the Squire, and found that he had had a dangerous attack, but was now better, and that although his life was very uncertain, still there was nothing to prevent him, with due care, from living for many years yet, though it was hardly probable that he would do so.

The fact of the uncertainty of the Squire’s life

quite changed the current of Alicia's thoughts. She began to think that it would not be a bad stroke of policy to secure Loyton more firmly to herself before the Squire's death; but yet she could hardly bring herself actually and knowingly to make advances to her father's gardener. She had really meant what she said when she told her mother that she could never lower herself to his level; but Loyton the gardener and Loyton the future Squire were two very different people. She saw beyond what he was now, and as from the first dull view of a transformation scene at a pantomime, canvas after canvas rolls away, until its full glory is displayed, so Alicia cast aside, one by one, the circumstances of Loyton's present situation, and allowed her mind to be dazzled by his future position. And so two opposing forces were dragging her in opposite directions; on the one hand was her pride, which would hardly allow her to act as her inclination, on the other hand, would have her to do. But her ambition was the more powerful, and the struggle with pride was not long continued. Loyton was a man with whom life for a few months, or perhaps a year, before the Squire's death, if it were necessary, would not be very unbearable, especially with

such an inducement as the certainty of afterwards being the mistress of Warnton Court. And then to think of her triumph! Would it not, indeed, be worth the few months' discomfort, and perhaps disgrace, of her marriage! So Miss Perry, though not without many qualms of conscience, came to the conclusion that Loyton's advances were to be encouraged.

One day, Miss Alicia went out into the garden for the express purpose of meeting with Loyton; her pride, which she thought she had entirely subdued, seemed to revive as she approached him, but she had firmly made up her mind, and was not now to be turned from her purpose. He was again engaged in the lime avenue, and very slowly she went up to him, and, after a pause, said quietly,

"Loyton, I have been scolded for talking to you, we must not meet so openly in future."

And the rising breeze shook the lime trees, and a shower of sere and yellow leaves fell around her.



CHAPTER IX.

THE WARNTON SCHOOL FEAST, AND WHAT HAPPENED THEREAT AND THEREABOUT.

MRS. LARCHPOLE heard so many praises of Miss Crookenden from Mr. Lindridge, that she drove over to Oakhanger in her pony carriage to call upon her. She was very pleased with her, and when she was going away she pressed her most warmly not to delay in returning her call, and since Miss Crookenden was not less struck by the kindness and niceness of Mrs. Larchpole, the call was soon returned, and some amount of intimacy had arisen between the two ladies.

The great gathering of the inhabitants of Warnton Kings was the annual school treat. It was held from year to year at the houses of

the different gentlefolks, and to it were invited not only the members of their set in Warnton, and the neighbouring parishes, but also most of the farmers' wives and daughters, and the mothers of the better class of children.

Now this year the parochial meeting was held at the Lawns, and one fine day in September Mr. Larchpole's grounds presented a scene of great animation. Part of the invited company had already arrived, and were now watching a long line of chattering school-children filing up the drive, mug in hand, to the place where the tea was to be distributed. Arrived there, they were seated on forms, without tables before them, to await the coming of the wished-for cake. But the first thing to be done was to sing grace, which they did in the usual discordant manner of school-children, probably because it was pitched in an impossibly high key. Every boy and girl put up their hands to their faces most devoutly during this grace, though through many fingers a watchful eye might have been observed peeping, regarding eagerly the movements of those around.

All then sat down, and some of the servants handed round plates loaded with cake, which

were rapidly emptied under the attacks of the children, while others filled their held-out mugs with tea which at any rate was hot. Wondrous is the quantity of hot water poured down the throats of the children on these occasions! Poor little things! They had no tables on which to put down their mugs, so the contents of many an one was spilled down a child's pinafore with one hand, while the other was eagerly grasping at the cake. Some little urchins, too, were observed to carefully empty their mugs on the ground, apparently only for the sake of getting them filled up again every time the tea came round. And when they had disposed of all the cake that could possibly be disposed of, and satisfied their desire for tea, they again stood up, and in the former devout manner sang grace, after which they were dismissed to their games.

Then the visitors sat down to their tea at a long table, at the top of which was seated Mrs. Larchpole, and next to her Mrs. Perry, while the rest of the company was arranged on a sliding scale from the gentry at the top down through the farmers' wives and daughters to the childrens' mothers at the bottom. They were regaled with a very superior kind of cake to that

given to the children ; and besides, on the table was bread and butter, with fruit and teacakes, and the tea was poured out of a proper teapot, instead of being distributed in a sweet and milky condition from a jug. Though all sat down at the same time, it was a fact to be noticed that the top of the table had finished first, and one after another rose, until at last the only occupants of the table were two or three old women at the bottom, who kept persistently eating cake and drinking tea for some time after all the rest had left.

After tea the races began ; the prizes being pencils, and pocket-handkerchiefs, and various small articles, and when these were gone pence and halfpence were produced and competed for. There were foot races and sack races, and wheelbarrow races, and three-legged races ; races for boys and races for girls ; in fact, races for everyone who chose to run. And then balloons were despatched to the clouds : the great triumph of the day being a very large balloon, to which was attached the figure of a man made of newspapers, and tied by his hands to the wire at the bottom of the balloon : he really looked quite human as the balloon ascended, for his head

fell back, and his legs moved as if indeed it were a real boy hanging on for his life. And all the time football and cricket were being indulged in by their admirers in a more distant part of the grounds, whilst the visitors looked on at the various games, or when tired of doing so, strolled into the conservatories, or round the walks, or played croquet on the lawn.

What can all this have to do with the story? I can hear an indignant reader exclaim, who, having read as far as this with a great loss of patience, is now completely out of temper. We know all about school feasts, he continues, we have been to them a hundred times, and we certainly don't want to have them intruded upon us when we are trying to be amused. I can only say, patience, dear reader; school feasts, though not uncommon things, may yet be connected with uncommon circumstances, and although this particular one was not, still on the other hand a very common circumstance happened at it, which certainly in its ulterior consequences did somewhat affect the destinies of Warnton Kings. Besides, I must tell my tale in my own way.

Of course the Perrys were at the Lawns to-

day, and Mr. Winnersley and Mr. Lindridge and Miss Crookenden were there also. Mr. Selton, too, came for half an hour during the afternoon; and many other people were there, who although they resided at Warnton Kings, have not the remotest connection with my story, and therefore I am sure that a long string of their names is very unnecessary.

Mr. Winnersley had been over to Oakhanger many times during the last few months, and to call on Mr. Lindridge was one of his most frequent walks. Perhaps the fact that he lived in the same parish as Miss Crookenden had something to do with these frequent visits, for his first impressions regarding her had by no means faded, but on the contrary had gained strength by the lapse of time, and he had begun to think seriously about her. That he could not ask her to share his home whilst he had so small an annual income he knew well, and yet he did not cease from seeking her company on every possible occasion. By some mysterious means he had discovered to what houses she went to give lessons, and by judiciously varying his walks about Oakhanger, it was wonderful how many times he came across her as she was either going

to or coming from her pupils, in a manner which he flattered himself was very clever, since he did not exactly wish to be thought to go purposely to meet her. No idea that he was doing wrong ever entered into his head ; if it had, he would have been the first to condemn himself ; but he was, like many good-natured men, rather thoughtless, and perhaps a little selfish, and he knew that he very much enjoyed his meetings and little walks with Miss Crookenden, never thinking what might be the consequence to her. And although he thought he saw that these meetings were not disagreeable to her, and flattered himself that there was some liking for his company to be seen in her manner, yet it did not strike him that he was hardly acting up to his own high standard of right and wrong in thus winning the affections of a girl he was too poor to marry. But at last he awoke to the fact that he deeply and truly loved Miss Crookenden, and became conscious at the same time of his thoughtlessness in so persistently seeking her. Strong-minded enough, however, in the ordinary affairs of life, when his heart was touched he was as weak as the weakest of mortals, and felt that he could not tear himself away from her, and

craved for anything to secure her to him, a word of love, a promise, or best of all an engagement, even though without the most distant prospect of fulfilment.

This was Mr. Winnersley's state of mind as he watched Emily Crookenden and Ellen Perry playing with the younger children. Ellen, however, was not long before she left her young playmates, and was soon deep in conversation with some of the old women out of the village, who much enjoyed a talk with her, for they were sure to obtain from her sympathy in their troubles, and interest in their doings; while Emily still continued to occupy herself with the children. Irwin Winnersley could not resist the temptation of going up to her; perhaps he had no positive intention of saying anything definite to her, but he was certainly in that state of mind which required but little encouragement to lighten itself of the weight which pressed upon it.

"Are you not tired of your task?" asked he, amused at her efforts to set on her legs a little mite, who seemingly could not go two steps without falling down.

"I like it very much," she answered, "but I

confess that it is tiring. There, run along," she continued to her little charge, who thereupon hastened away in a very unsteady manner to join some other children.

"Have you seen the conservatory?" inquired Mr. Winnersley, as she was watching the child out of danger.

"No, I have not yet, but I intended to go before evening," she answered.

"May I accompany you?" he asked, and not forbidden, he walked slowly with her towards the conservatory.

And so they admired the flowers and the fernery, and peeped into the grapehouse, and saw the purpling bunches now nearly ripe, whilst all this time Mr. Winnersley kept feeling more and more that something was compelling him to speak.

As Miss Crookenden went out of the greenhouse door, she turned to the right as if to rejoin the rest of the company, but Mr. Winnersley, in a manner in which boldness and bashfulness were strangely intermingled, said,

"Have you seen those walks to the left, Miss Crookenden? They lead down to the stream."

"No, I have not," she said; "is it pretty there?"

"I should be pleased to accompany you, if you will go to see," he answered.

And so, perhaps herself not objecting to be awhile with Mr. Winnersley under the shady trees, she turned round, and they entered the leafy walk together.

Then Mr. Winnersley could find nothing to talk about, but the fine afternoon, and the shrubs, and the trees; but he soon exhausted those topics, and was reduced to saying, what he had in sense if not in words, said two or three times before,

"I am glad it is fine for the school treat."

"Yes, so am I," said Miss Crookenden, "it is such a disappointment to the children if it is wet; this treat is looked forward to by them for the whole year."

"And I think it is a good thing for the parish as well as for the children, that high and low, rich and poor, should meet together as guests of the same person at the same time."

"I think more of the pleasure it must be to the poor children; at all events that is more evident than the good that is done," said Emily. "I am very fond of children; if music were not my profession, I think I should like to be a school teacher."

"I always think a clergyman's wife should be fond of children," said he, timidly leading up to the subject he had so much at heart.

"I think so too," said she unsuspectingly, "my mother was a clergyman's wife, and always took the greatest interest in the young people of the parish."

Here was the opportunity Irwin Winnersley had been so long awaiting, and yet now it was at hand his courage seemed to ebb away: nevertheless with an effort he collected himself, and laying his hand gently on her arm, said with evident trepidation, but with great earnestness,

"Do you, Miss Crookenden,—Emily, think you could be happy as the wife of a poor clergyman?"

Emily was indeed surprised at his speech; she had for some time suspected that Mr. Winnersley was growing fond of her, and when she inquired into her own feelings, she discovered that she was not indifferent to him; but that he would so soon ask her to be his wife had not crossed her mind. But here was the question, and what was she to say? She felt that she loved him, and she was too good and true a woman to say "no" merely for the purpose of playing with her

lover. So she stood still, with her head bent to the ground, while he continued with increasing boldness,—

“ Oh, Emily, tell me that I have not been too presumptuous in thus speaking to you ? ”

But Miss Crookenden stood still, with a solemn look upon her face. Though she had confessed to herself her love for him, yet when brought face to face with the question she saw that many things were involved in it which she had not realized before. At last she said, slowly,—

“ Mr. Winnersley, I have never thought about it.”

“ Do you think you could think ? ” asked he, in a low and passionate voice.

And then, after a short pause, a little hand stole towards his hand, and the lovers were indeed happy. No thoughts of the hard world rose before them: these would come to-morrow.

It was growing dusk as Mr. Winnersley and his companion rejoined the rest of the company. The schoolmaster was ringing a bell to assemble the children; this did not take long to do, for they were getting tired, and had collected in groups on the lawn. They were placed in a

semicircular row, whilst in the centre stood the vicar and the rest of the company. The prizes were now distributed, and Mr. Perry spoke to the children, and told them, as children always are told at school feasts (and we will hope that it makes a good impression upon them), to be good children, the better for the kindness shown them by giving them a treat; and that the object of this kindness was that they should grow up to be good men and women; and he continued with more good advice of the same nature. After he had finished they sang the evening hymn, and then filing before the company, they had each a good lump of cake given them, and marched off in the dark, making the place ring with their shouts.

Some few of Mr. Larchpole's more intimate friends then went into the house, where supper was provided for them; after supper the carriages drove up and the party separated—Miss Crookenden returning to Oakhanger in the carriage of a lady who would have to pass her house on her way home.

Alicia had not taken that interest in the school-children that her sister or Miss Crookenden had; while they were doing their best to amuse the children, Miss Lishey stood by and looked on,

considering, it may be, that the weather was too warm for any exertion to be pleasant to herself; for I am sorry to say that Lishey's first thought was generally for her own comfort, and I should not wonder if she looked upon the two aforesaid ladies with a feeling of compassionate superiority at being so cool and comfortable, whilst they were so foolishly exerting themselves for the sake of poor village children who would probably soon forget their particular kindness in their enjoyment of the whole treat; and Alicia rarely did anything that would not sooner or later be of direct advantage to herself.

Being thus unoccupied, Alicia could not help observing the attention paid by Mr. Winnersley to Miss Crookenden, and being, as I have said, fond of admiration herself, she felt that it was a personal injury that her father's curate should prefer the society of a paid organist to that of his vicar's daughter; not that she cared a bit about him personally, for she had so pondered over Loyton and his affairs that she had come to regard him as no bad young fellow, though she did not actually love him; but this fact did not prevent her from enjoying a little flirtation with other men if she had the chance.

This pettishness found a vent as she was walking home from the Lawns in the evening ; she, walking with her sister, allowed Mr. and Mrs. Perry to get some distance in front, and after a short silence she observed—

“ I can’t think what Mr. Winnersley can see in that girl Emily Crookenden.”

“ Can’t you ? I think she is a very nice girl indeed,” said her sister.

“ I shouldn’t have thought so,” said Lishey.

“ Why not ? ”

“ Because she is such a forward thing ; I noticed the way she encouraged him.”

“ Encouraged him ! I don’t think so.”

“ I do, though ; I saw her take him into the conservatory and then down the shrubbery walk.”

“ I fancy he took her, not she him.”

“ Then he ought to be ashamed of himself, taking notice of such a girl as that,” said Alicia, unconsciously changing her point of attack, “ she’s only a paid music-mistress.”

“ In my idea it is a great credit to her that she does help herself and her mother by her industry.”

“ But that doesn’t make her a person to be

noticed by people in any position at all. Mr. Winnersley ought to know better than to go after her when his vicar's daughters are present."

"I don't think he was so very wrong, Lishey dear," said Nellie, deprecatingly, seeing that Alicia was working herself up into a passion. "Surely he may please himself."

"It's all very well for you to say so," said Alicia, snappishly, "you're so good you always have someone after you."

"Oh, Lishey, how can you say such a thing?" exclaimed Nellie. She was not unaccustomed to these taunts of her sister's, for Lishey, when in a temper, as she was to-night, would sneer at everything, her sister included, however cool and collected she might be at other times; but Ellen with her forgiving and gentle temperament, would never retort, but would try by all means in her power to bring her sister to a better frame of mind.

"Yes, you have," said Alicia, in a hard voice, "you have Mr. Lindridge and Mr. Selton always at your heels; and I suppose they please themselves."

"Yes, indeed," said Nellie earnestly.

"No, they don't," said Lishey triumphantly,

"they please you, and what is more they know it."

"I like them both very much as friends," said Nellie quietly, "but you know I don't give them encouragement."

"No, I don't know it," said Lishey, though she was obliged to confess to herself that what her sister said was true.

At this point their conversation was interrupted by the passing of some village man, who, having taken far too much beer, was reeling home in the dusk of the evening. "Good night to you, Parson Ned," said he in a familiar tone as he passed; and then staggering along, he began to sing in a drunken voice the chorus of a drinking song he had probably just heard:

"Then marry a girl in your own rank of life,
And don't seek one above you,
For though you may think you've got a grand wife,
She soon will cease to love you."

And as he passed the girls he bellowed it out again.

"Poor man!" said Nellie, as they heard his voice get fainter and fainter as he passed along the road; "I am sorry for him."

"And so am I, indeed," said Lishey involun-

tarily, a picture of his wife waiting for him at home, to be saluted, it may be, with blows, arising before her, for her heart was not deadened to the wickedness of drunkenness.

This episode quite changed the current of Miss Perry's thoughts; the words of the drunken man brought back to her her proceedings with regard to Loyton, and when she considered how she was outwitting all her relations, and how superior she would soon be to her sister, her good temper in a measure returned, and her envy of the attentions paid to her sister and Miss Crookenden abated; so she said quietly, though she could not help just the shadow of a sneer passing over her words,—

“Well, Nellie, I know you don't encourage them; but when you have made your choice, I hope you may be happy.”

“At all events, I will make no one else unhappy by it,” answered Ellen gently, for she could not help confessing to herself that the society of Mr. Selton was not unpleasant to her, and that if at some future time he were to ask her to be his wife, she would not answer him with “no.”

After this, both walked silently, wrapped in

their own thoughts, the one pondering on a love that was good and true and pleasant, the other on designs that were to take the place of love, and schemes that were to gain for her that worldly position she so hungered after.

While the girls were thus talking, Mrs. Perry, knowing that they were out of hearing, was congratulating herself and her husband on the fact that Mr. Winnersley's attentions were directed towards Miss Crookenden and not towards either of her daughters.

"I am very glad, my dear Edward, that Mr. Winnersley does not bother Lishey, or even Nellie, with his attentions. I think that girl—Miss Crookenden" (for Mrs. Perry, too, considered that it was not genteel to work for money, even if it was respectable), "whom he seems to fancy so much, is far more suited to him. He may be of a very good family, but he is poor, and a poor man—even although he be a clergyman—can take no position."

I am bound to say that these were not Mrs. Perry's usual opinions, for she was generally very favourably disposed towards the cloth, and considered that a clergyman could not be otherwise than a man of position; but she was nettled

and annoyed that the very fact over the absence of which she now pretended to rejoice had not happened, for though she looked higher for her daughter, still she did not like her to be overlooked.

Mr. Perry, however, to her speech, ventured to answer, that "happiness ought not to be left out of consideration."

"A girl like Lishey, Edward," rejoined his wife, "cannot be happy unless she takes the position she is entitled to by birth, and this position is not to be maintained without wealth."

On the point under discussion, we already know that Mr. Perry's views were different from those of his wife; however, he meekly said nothing, but allowed his wife to hold her own ideas, without attempting to combat them, very probably because he knew it would be no use so to do.

At this juncture the drunken man passed by, and as the words of his song struck upon Mrs. Perry's ear, they perhaps sounded very applicable to her ambitious designs for her daughter, and a passing doubt might have suggested itself whether, indeed, her husband might not be right as to the unhappiness caused by unequal marriages; but she said nothing to indicate that the

current of her thoughts was running in such a direction; and her doubt, if she had one, remained only for a moment, for immediately it struck her that any marriage she might contemplate for her daughter could not possibly be unequal, whatever the world might say to it, for Lishey, in her idea, would not disgrace anyone, whatever might be his worldly standing.

While these things were passing through her mind she was silent; and the parson, contented with his own ideas, as he often was, did not attempt to impart them to, or elicit new ones from his companion. So they also walked on without speaking. They were not long, however, before they reached the Vicarage gate, and just then their daughters, who had quickened their pace, caught them up. They all went through the drive gate together, and as they were walking up to the house the parson said,—

“ Well, Lishey, dear, and how have you liked the school feast ? ”

“ Oh, very much,” answered Alicia enthusiastically.

“ I am afraid Nellie is tired,” said he, addressing himself to her.

“ No, indeed I am not,” said she. “ I don’t

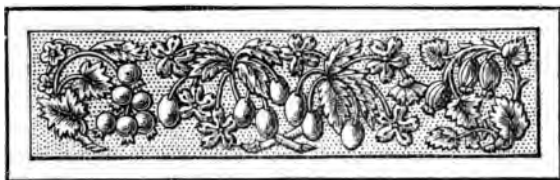
think that anything when you take an interest in it tires you half so much as if you do not."

Perhaps if Alicia had been alone with her sister when she made such a speech, she might have made some comment upon it, and brought either Lindridge or Selton, or both, into the question ; but being with her father and mother, she thought it best to agree with her sister, and said,—

"I was so interested all the time."

And so she had been, but not in the children or their proceedings, as she wished her parents to think.





CHAPTER X.

JEREMIAH SLEIGHT VISITS WARNTON.

JEREMIAH SLEIGHT had by this time succeeded in verifying the facts of the Loyton pedigree, and had traced it back to a marriage at Chancebridge, between the Reverend James Loyton and a certain Joyce Warnton, and of which Reverend James Loyton, the James Loyton at the Vicarage was great-grandson. But he had not yet found out in what relationship Joyce Warnton stood to the family at Warnton Court; and in order to do so he decided to search Warnton parish registers, and having a spare day on his hands, he took the opportunity both of having a walk in the country and of visiting Warnton Kings.

In his search through the Chancebridge registers, he found another Warnton marriage which took place about the same time as the former one, namely, the marriage of Richard Coynor with Dorothy Warnton: this lady he imagined to be the other Miss Warnton alluded to by James Loyton in his account of his family. But he could find no further trace of her in the register.

I don't think that Lawyer Sleight, in his inmost heart, expected to get much worldly advantage by thus constituting himself legal guardian of Loyton's expectations, but his grasping nature prompted him to take up anything that had on the face of it a good chance of benefiting himself; so he was led to prove the pedigree of Loyton, and when he had done so he found that it was more likely to be of benefit to himself than he had at first imagined, though he was still far from satisfied. He saw at once what he had to contend with. First and most important was the fact that Ralph Warnton might make a will. It was well known that the Warnton estate had been entailed on young Ralph, but now that he was dead, and the Squire had no other children, the power of willing the

estate reverted to him. But by some means a report had lately got about, which we, who are behind the scenes, know to have been founded upon fact, that he would make no will. Sleight, of course, could put no trust in these reports; he knew how uncertain such a fact would be even if there were any better foundation for the report than popular rumour. But still he felt that it was no bad thing to have discovered the heir-at-law, in case popular rumour should be borne out by the result, nor was it in any degree disadvantageous to him to have the heir-at-law under his own control. But was he the heir-at-law? This was the doubt that seemed to him the most important. Was Dorothy Warnton sister or cousin of Joyce? If she was sister, her descendants, if any, would share with Loyton in the Warnton property; if she was cousin, she might be the daughter of a brother older than the father of Joyce, and in consequence her descendants might have a prior claim upon Warnton Court. This doubt he expected to solve by searching Warnton register.

The registers of Warnton Kings were kept in the vestry, and were left by the Reverend

Edward Perry to the care and management of Thomas Cross, the clerk, and generally he deputed him to remain in the vestry while anybody was searching, instead of being present himself.

"Dear me," said the parson, one morning at breakfast while he was reading a letter he had just received, "here's a letter from Mr. Sleight."

"What about, papa?" asked Alicia immediately, hearing Sleight's name mentioned, and remembering his views on Loyton's case.

"Why, he wants to look through our register for Warnton entries," answered Mr. Perry.

"How interesting," said Alicia: "of course you will let him?"

"Let him," said Mr. Perry, still looking at the letter as if pondering over it, "I can't prevent him doing so if he likes. I wonder if he is looking into Loyton's claims. I shall be with him while he is searching, and see if I can find out what he is about."

"Shall you, Edward?" broke in Mrs. Perry, and something in her tone caused her husband to look up at her.

"I don't know," said Mr. Perry, suddenly brought to a sense of his wife's displeasure at his remarks, which was indicated by her expres-

sion, and which caused him hurriedly to put the letter into his pocket, and forthwith begin some other subject of conversation.

After breakfast was over, and Mrs. Perry had secured an opportunity of speaking to her husband in private, she took him severely to task for speaking so unguardedly of Loyton before Alicia.

"How could you be so thoughtless, Edward," said she, "after you know what has passed about Loyton?"

"I didn't think of it, Elizabeth, my dear," said the parson mildly.

"That is the very fault I find with you, Edward; you are always not thinking, and saying things you should not."

"But now it is said, I don't see any harm," remonstrated Mr. Perry.

"You never see anything everybody else can: of course it is harm. Every mention of Loyton in Alicia's presence is harm."

"Is it?" asked the parson innocently.

"Of course it is," answered his wife. "But you are hopeless. I never shall drive common sense into you—never," said Mrs. Perry resignedly.

"I think, though, I may as well see what extracts he makes, Elizabeth," said the parson, retreating under his wife's sharp words.

"Yes, I should like to know that," said Mrs. Perry, "you had certainly better be with him, but don't tell anyone but myself about it."

"Cross will be there," said Mr. Perry, "he always takes such interest in these researches, and I can't shut him out from this one."

"Well, never mind Cross," said his wife, "but don't say anything more about it to Alicia or Nelly. Fix what time you like, but don't let the girls know."

"Very well, my dear," assented her husband, "it shall be as you wish." And in the course of the day he wrote to Mr. Sleight, telling him he could search the register on the day and hour mentioned in his letter.

Mr. Perry awaited Jeremiah Sleight's arrival leaning on his drive gate, a very favourite position of his, since it was a point of vantage from which he could see much of what was going on among the houses that were clustered round the church, and from which, of course, he could see anyone who went up to the church itself. Punctual to the moment, for he prided himself

upon his punctuality, Mr. Sleight came up to the church and the parson went across from his drive gate to meet him.

"You are very punctual, Mr. Sleight," said the parson, perhaps the more admiring that quality because of the absence of it from his own composition.

"Punctuality, my dear sir," said Mr. Sleight, rubbing his hands gently together, and with his peculiar smile on his face, "is a most important quality in a man of business, and is especially necessary when a favour is being bestowed."

It was one of Mr. Sleight's peculiarities never to own that he had a right to do anything, and even if he might have had an occasion to enforce a right, he would proceed with a smile to take advantage of the favour accorded him. But, at the same time, he never on any occasion allowed a right of his to remain unasserted.

"Don't call it a favour, Mr. Sleight," said the parson, "you are very welcome. But what is it you want to find out?"

"The fact is, Mr. Perry, I, like many others, am interested in the Warnton family, and when you want to find out anything about a family, go to head-quarters, my dear sir, go to head-quarters."

"And so you come here," said Mr. Perry, smiling; "I hope you will find what you want."

By this time they had reached the vestry, and Cross, who was there, produced the register.

"What years do you want to search?" asked Mr. Perry.

"I want to begin about a hundred and twenty or thirty years ago, if you will be so good as to let me."

"I have not looked through the register myself, and as I naturally am interested in the family, perhaps you will tell me if you find anything of importance."

"Certainly, with the greatest pleasure, Mr. Perry," said Mr. Sleight.

So Mr. Perry stood by while the lawyer in silence looked over the book and made extracts therefrom; his smile, as he did so, at times seeming to deepen, and at others nearly to die away altogether. After he had finished his search, the parson observed him go over one place in the register carefully two or three times; then closing the register he rubbed his hands together and said, "Thank you, my dear sir; it is most interesting; I dare say you know that one of my hobbies is genealogy?"

"I have heard so," said Mr. Perry. "But what have you found out this morning?"

"Not so much as I expected, decidedly not so much as I expected, but still what is very interesting."

"Have you found anything to confirm Loyton's tale?" asked the parson; "he has told me that you know it."

"Well, partly, sir, partly; but I may decidedly say not entirely. The facts stand thus: I have found the birth of the Miss Warnton that married a Loyton, and thus his descent is proved without a doubt; but I can find no trace of the other lady he mentions. But that there was another Miss Warnton I am certain."

"But you know nothing of this lady and her descendants, do you?" asked the parson.

"If we can't find any trace of them, we must not therefore assume that there are none. No, my dear sir, we must be careful, decidedly careful, in matters of genealogy."

"Then you think Loyton has no chance of succeeding to the property?"

"Succeeding to the property, Mr. Perry? Look at the facts, my dear sir, look at the facts," said the lawyer, slightly parting his hands, and

then gently rubbing them together again. "The present owner is not dead yet, and of course all suppositions are out of place until then."

"But if he should make no will?" suggested Mr. Perry.

"If it does turn out so, Mr. Perry, then 'if' comes into consideration, but until then it is perfectly useless," said Mr. Sleight, decisively, taking up his hat, and seeing Cross, who had been there all the time. He then went out with Mr. Perry, and after a few commonplace remarks started back to Chancebridge.

Mr. Perry followed out conscientiously his wife's injunction, and told no one else the little he had to tell; how little it was he found out when he detailed to his wife his conversation with Sleight. In fact the lawyer had carefully abstained from giving any information beyond what was already known, except that he said Loyton's tale was true; nor had he given any opinion whatever as to the prospects of Mr. Perry's gardener. Mrs. Perry laid down her husband's usual thoughtlessness as the cause of his having gleaned so little information, and intimated to him that she was sure she could have done better, a point upon which he did not contradict her.

Thomas Cross, after he had locked up the register and left the church, made the best of his way to the Warnton Arms, and calling for a mug of beer, he began to tell Joe Dorman of Sleight's visit to the register, which he asseverated had made him very thirsty.

Joe Dorman listened attentively to all Cross told him, and when the clerk came to that part of his tale in which Sleight said that Loyton was without doubt related to the Squire, he could not help drawing himself up, and triumphantly remarking, though apparently with a sense of profound relief,—

“Why, that's just what I said.”

Cross was by no means inclined to let Joe's assumption of superiority pass unquestioned, especially as he too was disappointed at learning so little from Sleight, so he said—

“But we all said so too.”

Joe, however, deemed this unworthy of a reply, and asked if he had heard anything more.

“No, I heard nothing more, but Mr. Sleight and Parson Ned went off talking, and I don't know what he told him then.”

Joe shook his head doubtfully. “Lawyer Sleight's a deep one. There's something in it

you may be sure, Thomas Cross; I say so," said he.

"Perhaps there is, and perhaps there isn't," said Cross, as he finished his beer and went out, "don't be too certain, Joe."

And Joe went into his parlour and sat down, pondering over the confirmation of what he thought was his own idea.

It was not long before the knowledge of Sleight's visit was spread abroad through the parish. Joe Dorman had not been able to refrain from telling some of his especial cronies how his suspicions had been confirmed. By these means it had come to Loyton's ears that his relationship to the Squire had been proved. But it did not make him any more confident about himself; in fact it seemed to him merely another confirmation of what he already believed, but considered of little or no importance. Of so little importance indeed did he consider it, that he did not even tell Alicia at any of his meetings with her. So, though it was kept from her ears, it was not from any regard to Mrs. Perry's injunction.

Mr. Sleight, as he walked home, revolved in his mind the facts he had arrived at that day.

He had discovered that Joyce Warnton, the wife of James Loyton, was the daughter of a John Warnton, younger and only brother of the then Squire, though he had not, as he expected to do, found anything about Dorothy Warnton, and was still in the same doubt about her. But he had now proved in every generation the truth of Loyton's pedigree, and would not be afraid to take it into any court of law. At the same time he had discovered that evidences of Dorothy Warnton were not to be found in the neighbourhood, and so, unless her descendants had kept a particular register of their descent it would be very difficult for them to prove their claim if they put one forward. He was quite satisfied on that point, and the only thing now doubtful, was whether the Squire would make a will. But this was a thing he could not provide against: if a will was made, his trouble would be of no use to him; if a will was not produced, he was ready with Loyton's claim. So he was satisfied to wait.





CHAPTER XI.


JOE DORMAN MAKES A DISCOVERY.



JOE DORMAN, as mine host of the Warnton Arms, did not think it beneath his dignity to add to the wealth that flowed into his pockets thereby by keeping a small dairy farm. He had some few acres of grass land and three cows, and their milk he sold to some of the inhabitants who did not keep those indispensable animals, and in the summer he did a good business by supplying the lodgers in the village also. Most of Joe's land lay down in the valley by the stream, and one of his fields joined up to the Vicarage grounds, from which it was separated by a sunk fence, whilst another ran alongside the lime avenue we have already seen.

Joe Dorman was a dull, good-natured man, and, like many men of his disposition, he was intensely suspicious; he would ponder over a circumstance, however trifling in itself, until it gained great importance in his eyes, and then he would shake his head, and mutter to himself, "There's something in it." And yet Joe Dorman was highly conscientious, and was to be implicitly trusted in all matters of business. His milk, if not entirely free from water, had far less of that element in it than that of his milk-dealing neighbours; his beer was very good, and his tobacco was not soddened with water. Joe, nevertheless, was one of those men whose very appearance invites a practical joke. One man, however tattered and torn, will command at least respect from the passer-by, whilst another, whatever may be his social position, is the butt of everyone with whom he comes in contact. Many, therefore, were the tricks played upon Joe Dorman. Most irate when he discovered himself to be a victim, he would soon cool down and laugh as heartily as ~~any~~one at the joke; and although he was chaffed and victimized in this manner, he was too great a favourite to be really harmed.

Poor Joe had been sadly taken in one night during the past winter. One evening he was sitting by his comfortable fire, pipe in mouth, reading over the local paper by the light of a flickering candle, and listening, with great satisfaction at his own position, to the rain pattering on his window and the wind whistling at his front door. Suddenly, one of the younger lads of the village burst into the room: "Oh! Mr. Dorman, your best cow is choking!" exclaimed the youngster, with every appearance of haste. Up jumped Joe, put down his favourite "churchwarden" so hurriedly that it was shattered into fragments, and as hurriedly lighting his old horn lantern, rushed out into the pouring rain across his yard to his cowhouse, only to find his three cows quietly lying down, and looking round mildly, astonished at the unwonted apparition. Evidently they were all right, and Joe retraced his steps, vowing vengeance against everybody, when suddenly the extraordinary appearance of his pump attracted his attention: the handle was stuck straight out, and was evidently not as it should be, and to Joe's great horror and indignation, a closer inspection showed that someone had played upon him the time-honoured joke of



stopping up his pump-spout with a turnip. Joe's rage was unbounded; he did not stop to think that whoever had so insulted his dignity as to ill-treat his pump had probably got well soaked by the rain during his operations, and he got no comfort from that idea. However, by degrees he calmed down and began to see the ludicrous side of the occurrence, and by the time his customers began to drop in for their nightly glass, he had quite got over his anger. And well it was that he had begun to think thus of his fruitless journey, for he had to stand a great quantity of banter that night. Everybody seemed to know of the accident to his favourite cow, and everybody inquired earnestly after its health. But Joe by this time was again in a good humour with himself and all the world, and placing his thumbs in their usual resting-place, leant back in his chair, and answered all inquiries with a loud laugh and a boisterous exclamation:—"Indeed, there was something in it." It was a long time before Joe heard the last of the accident.

But this was at least ten months ago, and the novelty of the thing had worn away. Joe's cows had since then flourished, and no mishap had happened either to them or their iron-handled

companion, and they were now turned out in the meadows near the Vicarage. The Warnton Arms was no great distance away across the fields; and as the weather was not yet cold enough to cause the cows to be taken home every night, they remained in the meadows, and either Joe, or the man he kept to help him, went night and morning to milk them.

One morning Joe was up early, and came down to his cows with his milk-cans in his hands and his milking-stool under his arm. His cows happened to be under the lime-trees, which had now lost nearly all their leaves, and Joe went there to milk them. He stood there some few seconds before he commenced operations, and as he did so he heard voices on the other side of the hedge. Joe's curiosity was aroused, and standing on tiptoe, he peered over the hedge that divided his fields from the Vicarage. He saw directly that the voices belonged to James Loyton and Miss Perry, and he observed also that they were walking together on terms of great familiarity, and that there was "something in it" that there ought not to be. Whether Joe would have stood quietly whilst they came near, and so have heard what they were talking about, I do

not know, but as it was he had not the chance of doing so, for he was so astonished at the sight that he let fall his cans and sank down upon his milking-stool in a state of most abject wonder. Of course the clatter of the falling cans informed Loyton and his companion that someone was there, and so Joe heard them no more.

Joe Dorman milked very slowly and with great deliberation that morning, frequently stopping to shake his head and mutter to himself; in fact his conduct was so unlike that which his favourite cow had been accustomed to, that she brought him to his senses by kicking over the pail, and sending Joe flat on his back on the wet grass. Quickly recovering himself, however, and picking up his pail, which, luckily, when overturned had but little milk in it, he went on with his occupation in a much steadier manner, whether induced thereto by the fear of losing more of his milk, or because he wisely deferred the consideration of his course of action to a more fitting opportunity, cannot now be known. Suffice it to say that his walk from the field to his house occupied a longer time than usual, and that he was unusually silent that morning. The fact was that he had a weightier subject on his mind than

he was accustomed to, and it took every one of his available wits to see clearly what course he ought to take.

Joe at once saw that something was going on that the parson ought to know. Strange to say, all his suppositions about Loyton were put to flight by the fact that the parson's daughter was walking on intimate terms with the parson's gardener. Should he, or should he not, go and tell the parson what he had seen was the question he set himself to solve. Now Joe, as I have said, was not gifted with any superabundance of brains, but still he had enough to see that to tell the parson would be a very delicate business, and that it would be far easier to keep his own counsel and say nothing to anybody about what he had seen. But here his conscientiousness stepped in: he could never have faced the parson with any degree of comfort, knowing what he did about his daughter, and feeling that he was doing him a wrong by not speaking to him at once. Perhaps a man of greater strength of mind would at once have determined to keep his own counsel—it may be, taking refuge in that time-worn excuse for indifference, "It's no business of mine." But Dorman was not of this disposition:

he felt that he must tell the parson, however disagreeable to himself the telling might be; and he also made up his mind to do it as soon as he could, and get it over. So that afternoon Joe put on a decent coat, and taking up his best hat, he started for the Vicarage.

Joe Dorman's mind did not comfortably contain more than one idea at a time; up to the present this idea had been that he must go to the Vicarage, but now that he was on his way, this idea began to fade, and dire misgivings as to what he was to say arose before him; and as he neared the parson's house, what little self-possession he had before had begun to desert him, and instinct, more than reason, kept urging him onwards. At last he reached the back-door of the Vicarage, and the sharp sound of the bell as he pulled it brought him somewhat to his senses.

He was shown in to the vicar's little study, and had only time to look round the room—by which look, however, I don't think he gained much information—before the parson himself came in.

"Good day, Dorman," said he. "What is it you want to see me about?"

Dorman fidgeted with his hat with one hand,

whilst the thumb of the other went straight to the armhole of his waistcoat, and he looked at the parson with a puzzled air. He did not quite like to come to the subject at once, frightened, perhaps, as to how his business would be received ; so he said slowly and hesitatingly,—

“I saw something, sir, this morning, that I think you ought to know of.”

“Something I ought to know, is it?” repeated Mr. Perry. “What is it—one of my parishioners misconducting himself?”

“Well, not exactly a parishioner, sir,” answered Dorman, dubiously, putting off the evil moment.

“Who was it, then?” questioned the parson.

And then, after a short pause, during which time Joe looked doubtfully at the parson, and then at the ceiling, and then at the floor, a sudden access of courage seemed to seize him, and he told him the whole story.

Mr. Perry listened attentively to Joe’s tale ; he did not allow him to see how much he was affected by it, but all the time he was thinking over how he could best turn off Joe’s suspicions, and put a good face on the matter. How much he was grieved and vexed, not only at his daughter

placing herself in such a position, but also at her so deliberately breaking the promise she made to her mother, he did not allow himself to realize, for all his thoughts were turned to getting the matter hushed up.

Joe, seeing that Mr. Perry listened so calmly to his narrative, plucked up his spirits, and began to feel quite at his ease; and after he had told all, he suddenly thought about Loyton's expectations, and immediately asked the parson his opinion about the matter.

The parson being a man who disliked trouble of any kind, and feeling that it would indeed be a great trouble to have his daughter commonly talked about, and who also, to prevent this happening, perhaps did not mind departing a little from the strict truth, saw here the chance he had been seeking; for if he gave thick-headed Joe to understand that he believed him to be the man, and that his daughter's meetings with him were not unknown to him, he would take the edge off Joe's suspicions, and a word to him to keep it quiet would have the desired effect. So he answered,—

“I have no doubt of his being at least related to the Squire.”

"So Cross told me, sir," said Joe, by his remark letting Mr. Perry know that Mr. Sleight's visit to Warnton, and probably all he said also, was well known in the parish.

"If he does get the property, Dorman, he will be very rich," continued the parson.

"It will be very different for him then, won't it, sir?" remarked Joe.

"He may not be a gardener always," said Mr. Perry.

It began to glimmer before the astonished Joe what the parson was driving at, and that he had come to tell him something he already knew, and his astonishment was so great that a knowing smile rose over his round cheeks, and he could not help blurting out,—

"You knew that they were sweet upon each other then, did you?"

He wondered at himself after he had uttered this sentence, for he could understand that it was not quite the thing to say under the circumstances, and he expected a rebuke for his rude speech; but if the parson was offended, he did not show it, but said, forcing himself to appear amused,—

"Well, Dorman, I won't say anything about

that, but I don't want it to be known in the village what I think about Loyton's prospects, for such things always get talked about, and if it gets to his ears, it will quite spoil him as a gardener—for me at all events. So I know I can trust you, Joe, not to chatter about it in the village. Thank you for coming to tell me." And the parson rose, and Dorman picked up his hat, which he had dropped in the course of the conversation, and left the parson's study.

Mr. Perry was quite right in trusting Joe Dorman; now that his suspicions were dispelled, he would have felt it a great blow to his own self-importance to let anybody else share it with him. So his feelings during the walk to the Parsonage were very different from those he now experienced. He smiled as he thought how knowing he must have been to have seen all the time that there was something in it, and to have told everybody that he thought there was something in it; and now, though he might repeat his opinions, how particularly careful he would be not to say that he knew there was something in it.

Mr. Perry, when Dorman had left the house, at once sought his wife, not this time merely

from the habit of going to his wife for advice in everything, but because he thought that this matter so deeply touched them both, that whatever steps might be taken to remedy it ought to be agreed upon together. He soon found Mrs. Perry, and asked her to come to his study, for there he was sure of not being interrupted. Mrs. Perry at once saw that something weighed heavily upon her husband's mind, for only very important questions of family policy were discussed in her husband's room, and questions, too, in which he asserted his right to have an equal voice with her own.

"Won't I scold Alicia!" said Mrs. Perry angrily, when she had heard the parson's tale.

"I should not, my dear," said the parson; "I am afraid it would only make her more determined to follow her own course."

"But I must speak to her about it," said she; "she promised me not to talk to him. To think of our daughter so lowering herself! Why did we not send him away before?"

"At all events, we must send him away now."

"Yes, that we must; send him off to-morrow, or next day, or as soon as ever we can," said Mrs. Perry.

Mrs. Perry was utterly knocked up by what she had heard, and it was with difficulty that the parson had restrained her from sending at once for Alicia or Loyton—she did not much care which—to expend her wrath upon. But as Mrs. Perry became more excitable under difficulties, the calmness of the parson stood him in good stead, and he was much more likely to pursue the right course than his usually more managing wife.

How far Alicia had strayed from maidenly propriety both knew, and both knew well the determination of her character; it was, indeed, a shock to both her parents to find that their eldest daughter was no longer to be trusted, and of the two I am not sure if placid Mr. Perry did not feel it more than his wife.

"I should not say anything to Alicia herself about it," said Mr. Perry, "nor should I be in a hurry to send Loyton away."

"Oh, they must be separated," broke in Mrs. Perry; "they must indeed."

"Yes, my dear," assented the parson, "but to do it hastily would do more harm than good. I have a plan that I think will be successful, if you approve of it, Elizabeth."

Mrs. Perry had a sister, by name Mary, who had married Thomas Duggard, a large farmer at Closingham, a village some fifty or sixty miles away from Warnton Kings; she had no children, and had often written to Mrs. Perry, asking her to allow one of her daughters to go over and stay with her at the Bicknall Farm; but Mrs. Perry, in whose idea farms and farming were not genteel, had always hitherto made an excuse, but Mrs. Duggard, whenever she wrote to her sister, which was not often, mentioned the subject to her. It so happened that Mrs. Perry, some few days ago, had received a letter from her sister containing the usual invitation, and it was yet unanswered.

"I propose," continued Mr. Perry, "that we let Alicia go and stay with Mrs. Duggard at Closingham for a month or two, while we get Loyton out of the way."

"I don't think she would like to go," said Mrs. Perry; "but anything is better than letting her stay here with that man Loyton."

"I think you had better talk to her," said the parson, "and ask her if she would like to go."

"Yes, I will," said Mrs. Perry, brightening up at the idea of thus solving the great difficulty

that was before them ; “ and I will write to Mary to-morrow. I do hope she will go without making a fuss.”

And so it was agreed that Alicia was to be asked to go and stay with her aunt ; therefore she was taken aside by her mother after breakfast the next day, when, to Mrs. Perry’s astonishment, she consented with a kind of half-disguised eagerness, to pay a long visit to her Aunt Dugard at the Bicknall Farm.





CHAPTER XII.

WHAT MRS. CROOKENDEN TELLS MR. WINNERSLEY.

THE Reverend Irwin Winnersley's frequent meetings with Miss Crookenden had not gone altogether unnoticed, at least by one person, John Pilgrimson, who often came across them in his journeys to Oakhanger, where many of his customers resided. But John, although he himself saw the state of affairs, kept his own counsel, and as he had been clever enough to find it out, he left other people to do the same without his telling them. Mr. Winnersley, during the few months he had been in the parish, had become a great favourite with most of the parishioners, and especially with John Pilgrimson : perhaps it was that he was not "stuck up,"

and frequently stopped to talk to the old man, and to listen to his long, mournful tales of the past history of the parish and its inhabitants ; but he never could get him to speak of himself ; if Mr. Winnersley ever tried to turn the conversation that way, the sweep would at once cease his talk and seem as suddenly to retire into himself as an injured snail into its shell.

You may be sure that Mr. Winnersley knew where Emily Crookenden was to give lessons the day after the school feast, so he started off to meet her as she left her pupil's house, intending to accompany her home, and get her mother's consent to their engagement. On his way down the Oakhanger hill, he met John Pilgrimson, who, as usual, stopped to speak to him ; but the curate was in a hurry, and just halting to say good morning, made as if he would hasten on. This did not escape the notice of the sweep : he divined the cause directly, and said,—

“ Ah, sir, she's a good girl—she's a good girl, and will make a good wife.”

Irwin stopped at being thus addressed, a look of confusion covered his face, but he said nothing, for he could not deny the fact that the sweep implied, nor did he wish to confess it.

"Get on, sir, get on," continued the sweep, seeming, as he generally did, to talk more to himself than to the person he really addressed, "she is worth having; get on, sir." And he touched his cap and started off.

Mr. Winnersley could not help feeling annoyed at being thus openly taxed with what he regarded as a profound secret, but when he came to think that it was the sweep, a privileged person, so to speak, who was thus advising him, his vexation was much allayed; and amusement rather than anger getting the upper hand, he answered the sweep as they parted on their different ways,—

"I think I know what you mean, John; thank you for your advice. Good morning."

Not much was said between the lovers as they walked towards Mrs. Crookenden's little cottage; but not speaking about the subject nearest to the heart of each did not lessen their happiness: each knew who was first in the thoughts of the other, and the happiness caused by this was neither to be diminished nor increased by a thousand words more or less.

Mrs. Crookenden was now entirely confined to her room; but she was able at intervals to

move to an easy-chair, and be wheeled to the window, from which there was a pretty view of the little stream overshadowed by trees, and at times she could receive a few of her more intimate friends.

She was thus sitting, when Mr. Winnersley entered the room. He had frequently called upon her before, so that he was no stranger to her : she had been quietly watching the growing affection between her daughter and him for some time, not unwilling perhaps to find for her daughter, in the time of her bereavement which she felt now was not a long way off, a protector of whom she could approve.

She was, therefore, not surprised when her daughter recounted to her what had taken place at the school feast, for although she had not expected the curate to declare himself quite so soon, still that he would do so sooner or later she felt assured. She knew, then, the object of his visit that afternoon, and after the usual greetings and inquiries had passed, and Mr. Winnersley was seated on a chair at the opposite side of the window to herself, somewhat constrainedly and uneasily perhaps, she thus commenced the conversation :

"My daughter has told me what you said to her yesterday at the Lawns."

"I am very glad indeed," said Mr. Winnersley, much relieved that the subject was directly broached, and encouraged also by the favourable tone of Mrs. Crookenden's remark ; "I do hope you don't object to my proposal."

"It is a very serious subject," said Mrs. Crookenden, "and must not be approached without great deliberation."

"Indeed it is," said Mr. Winnersley earnestly, "but I love your daughter truly, and I hope that will go a long way towards influencing you in my favour."

"Love, Mr. Winnersley, however true—however passionate, will keep no one from starving, without gold."

"But yet true love brings contentment, and contentment will make a little go a long way."

"That may be so," said Mrs. Crookenden, "and yet I should not like to think that my daughter would always have to struggle against poverty."

Mr. Winnersley was silent : he knew that Mrs. Crookenden was right, and that a life of

“genteel” poverty is the hardest life to be borne. She continued,—

“You see, Mr. Winnersley, we are very poor; I have but very few pounds a year to depend upon besides Emily’s earnings. Now, she gives lessons in music; then, as your wife, she could not well do so; now, she plays the organ as professional organist; then, as Mrs. Winnersley, she would be debarred from doing so, and so what means she has of adding to our little income would be denied her. You would marry a penniless girl, Mr. Winnersley.”

Irwin Winnersley was obliged to agree to what Mrs. Crookenden said. “I know that what I have, though sufficient for a bachelor, is hardly sufficient for a wife. I have only about one hundred and fifty pounds a year to depend upon besides my curacy—and my curacy, though a very good one, is not to be reckoned a permanency; but still my father, though not well off, has some interest, and in the course of a few years I may look for a living. I would be content to wait any length of time for your daughter if you will but consent to our engagement.”

“I, myself, was the wife of a poor clergyman,”

said Mrs. Crookenden, "and I know the struggles and strivings of such a life, and I should be sorry to think that my daughter was condemned to the same. And yet there is no one that I know whom I should prefer to you for a husband for my daughter. Mr. Winnersley, I have reason to think that my time on earth is now short, and when I am gone, Emily will be without anyone to care for her in the world. If you really love her, and I believe you do, I cannot object to your engagement to her; but please don't think of marrying her yet, leave her to me during the short time that I shall be here." And Mrs. Crookenden burst into tears.

"Thank you, indeed, thank you," said Mr. Winnersley, deeply affected, and yet scarcely able to conceal his joy; "I do indeed truly love Emily, and I will try to show you by my behaviour how deeply grateful I am to you for your consent. You shall never regret it, Mrs. Crookenden, if I can help it."

"There now, leave me for the present," said Mrs. Crookenden, "go and find Emily, and tell her what I have said." Then Mr. Winnersley, nothing loath, went to look for her.

He found Miss Crookenden sitting in a low

chair in the parlour of the little cottage. She had evidently been crying, for her eyes looked heavy; now, however, she was apparently reading, though her mind was wandering from her occupation. She started up as Mr. Winnersley entered the room, but immediately sank down again upon the chair, and hid her face in her hands. Mr. Winnersley rushed eagerly up to her, and throwing himself on his knees beside her, clasped his hands and rested them on her shoulder, and said passionately,—

“Emily, now I may call you my own; your mother has consented to our engagement.”

She made no answer, but kept her face hidden in her hands, while at times there escaped a half-suppressed sob.

“Look up, Emily, my dearest,” he implored; “say you are glad.”

“How can I ever leave my mother?” said she; “I never can leave her.”

“I shall never ask you to do so,” he answered; “only let me think of you as my future wife, be it years before it come to pass, and I shall be happy.” And he took one of her hands from before her face into his possession.

“Don’t ask me to leave her,” she said, looking

at him with tears in her eyes; "let me stay with her while she is yet on this earth. I sometimes fear it will not be long." And again she covered her face.

"Let me be your earthly comfort in all your trials," said Winnersley earnestly; "trust me that I shall never add to them by any wishes of mine. Cheer up, Emily, dearest, and let us hope for the best; say you love me, my darling."

"Ay, that I do," she said, looking up suddenly with a smile shining through her tears, and stretching out both her hands to his; "I know that you love me, Irwin;" and then, seeming half-frightened at having so straightforwardly confessed her love, she jumped up and rushed to the door, saying as she opened it,—

"I must go and see my mother, Irwin."

While she was upstairs, Irwin Winnersley paced round the little room, then stood and looked vacantly out of the window, and then set off pacing round the little room again. His heart was full; he had gained the love of the woman he loved, and had also received her mother's consent to the engagement; he did not care how long he had to wait for his wife; it was sufficient happiness for him to know that she would some

day be his. He was revolving these thoughts—for him so full of joy—over and over again in his mind, and pacing up and down the room, unconscious of the flight of time, when the door opened, and the now smiling face of Emily peeped in: “Mother wants to see you again before you go,” she said; “will you come upstairs with me?”

Mr. Winnersley obeyed her summons with alacrity, and as he was going up the stairs he possessed himself of a little hand, and kept it while he entered Mrs. Crookenden’s room, and then leading Emily up to her mother, he said, solemnly:—

“With heaven’s help, neither of you shall ever have cause to repent the confidence you have reposed in me to-day.”

“There is no one, Mr. Winnersley,” said Mrs. Crookenden, “to whom I would sooner trust my daughter than you in the trials and temptations that come to everyone, sooner or later, and it is indeed a comfort to me in my declining years, to think that my daughter has found a true heart to rest upon. But I sent for you,” she continued, “to know if you would like to sit half-an-hour with me while I tell you what little I know about

our family; because I consider you one of us, now."

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure," said Winnersley, taking a chair and drawing it up to Mrs. Crookenden, after seeing that Emily was comfortably seated.

"My husband's father was a wealthy merchant," she began, "in one of the large towns of the north of England, who had only two children—my husband Henry, and an elder son James. He sent them both to the University, and soon after he died, leaving the bulk of his property to his son James, but nevertheless leaving my husband a handsome fortune for a younger son. The two brothers were very different in character; the elder was wild, impetuous, and thoughtless, whilst the other was more careful and prudent. James Crookenden was the master of a handsome fortune, and launched out into all sorts of extravagances; he fell into the hands of bad companions, who flattered him, and told him it was a grand thing to do this, that, and the other, all the while preying upon his good nature. One of his greatest friends was a Frederick de Carey, the eldest son of an Irish baronet, Sir Lionel de Carey, and who was one of the wildest

and most unscrupulous men in the University. In gambling and horse-racing, James's money rapidly diminished, while he gradually imbibed a taste for strong drink, which in time became completely his master. His brother Henry was very grieved at his proceedings, but James would not listen to his advice, but repulsed him even with blows, and so he was obliged unwillingly to leave him alone in his downward career. His affairs grew worse, and his health gave way: he was found one morning dead in his bed—not without some suspicion of foul play. His boxes had been ransacked, and Frederick de Carey was suspected, for he had disappeared. It was supposed that he had gone abroad, for he never appeared again to any of his friends, nor could he be found. The small remains of James's fortune came to my husband as his heir-at-law. He took his degree, and was ordained. While he was yet a curate he married, and having a competency of his own, accepted a small living under two hundred a year. His money was chiefly invested in shares in a large bank; a crisis came, and he lost all his fortune, with the exception of a very few hundred pounds. We had to struggle on at the small rectory; we had only enough to live upon. Not

long after Emily was born he fell ill, and when she was about fifteen he died, having been a confirmed invalid for the latter years of his life. What we have been doing lately you know, Mr. Winnersley."

"It is indeed a sad tale," he said, "both of wasted opportunity and long struggling with the world. Let me hope that the years to come will be bright enough to cast a rosy reflection on the years gone by."

"I fancy sometimes the years to come for me are very few indeed, but my daughter won't let me say so."

"Of course I won't, mother dear," said Emily, decisively; "you know you have been better this last month than you have been for some time before."

"Yes, I am better now, dearie; I hope and pray it may last."

"I am very interested in your history," said Mr. Winnersley; "but don't you know anything of your father-in-law's family connections?"

"No, very little of them. Henry said that there were some writings and books belonging to his father, but he supposed they were lost in the general wreck of James Crookenden's pos-

sessions. We have always thought that de Carey laid his hands on everything that was valuable, for he, too, was very badly off at that time."

"Has not de Carey ever been found?" asked Mr. Winnersley.

"No; his proceedings broke his father's heart, and he was never a strong man afterwards. His brother, at his father's death, caused search to be made everywhere for him, but he could not be found. His brother, however, would never assume the title; now, however, I see in the paper that his son calls himself Sir Lionel de Carey, so the family must have given him up for lost."

"What a very strange story," remarked Mr. Winnersley. And then the conversation turned upon general subjects.

The time passed quickly to Mr. Winnersley; the hour of his departure soon came, far too soon for the lovers, who were now just beginning to taste the sweets of mutual love; however, Mr. Winnersley was obliged to tear himself away, and reluctantly began his homeward walk.



CHAPTER XIII.

WHAT LED TO THE DISMISSAL OF MR. PERRY'S GARDENER.

THE fact that Squire Warnton still kept in a very doubtful state of health had caused Alicia Perry to make up her mind to marry James Loyton without any loss of time, and that she could marry him at any time she liked she felt sure, for although he had as yet made her no absolute offer, restrained perhaps by some feeling that it would be too great a piece of presumption on his part, still she saw that a few words from her would cause him to speak definitely to her. But she had deferred speaking these few words because she had not clearly seen how the ceremony was to take place without great publicity ;

and though she intended to marry him, yet she intended to try if she could keep him at a certain distance until the death of the Squire should place him in his future position, and of course, if she were to get herself publicly talked about, this could not be. She herself had thought of her aunt's at Closingham, and how favourable a place it would be at which to carry out her plans, but she had not known how to suggest paying her a visit without arousing the suspicions of her parents. When she was asked if she would like to go, she at once divined that her meetings with Loyton had been discovered, and that her parents were anxious for her to go there while they sent Loyton away. She therefore eagerly fell in with the proposition, seeing in it the very opportunity she had been seeking, and at the same time perceiving that matters could now no longer be delayed. And yet although she was very anxious for Loyton to be secured to herself, still she could not quite conquer a feeling of repugnance at having to make the necessary advances; for her worldly ambition was not quite strong enough entirely to smother that feeling of womanly consciousness, which every woman possesses, however much it may be

repressed and deadened by force of will or circumstances.

Now that the visit was determined upon, it was necessary to inform Loyton of her intended movements, and also to ask him to come to her at Closingham. She was aware that it would be very rash of her to attempt to see him personally that night, and yet it was important that he should know, as she was to start for her aunt's the next day. She therefore determined after great deliberation to write him a letter, and sitting down to her table, she wrote thus :—

“ I am going to Closingham to my aunt's to-morrow ; you have heard me speak of her. I have reason to think that you will be discharged. When you leave Warnton, come, and either take lodgings in the village, or in Pensfield, the nearest town. Don't write to me, but come as soon as you can ; I shall be looking out for you.

“ ALICIA PERBY.”

This practical note she read over carefully, and then folded it up and addressed it to Loyton at his lodgings. She dared not post it at the Warnton post-office ; she was too well known,

and the curiosity of the old post-mistress was so great, that detection might be the result; but fortunately for her, she and her mother were to go to Chancebridge that afternoon, and in so large a town as that the letter might be posted without fear. So when she arrived at Chancebridge it was safely deposited in the post.

The step Alicia was about to take would have frightened anyone not so determined as she was: but she never thought that any of her plans could fail, and consequently never lost her great confidence. She intended to marry Loyton at some quiet country church, and then, though how it could come to pass she did not trouble herself to think, to return to Warnton Kings, no one being aware of what had taken place, and there stay until the time should arrive to proclaim herself the wife of Loyton, and mistress of Warnton. That it was within the bounds of probability that she was leaving the Vicarage for the last time she never recognized.

This sudden determination of Alicia to pay her aunt a visit was a matter of great surprise to Nellie Perry. Too simple and right-minded to imagine evil of anyone, especially of her sister, she had no notion of the true reason. She, like

such good and pure minds, which grow, let us be thankful, like white lilies among the garish poppies and tangled weeds of this world, thought that everyone must be as good and pure as herself. She loved her sister dearly, in spite of the hard words she sometimes received from her, and never gave a thought as to whether she was as incapable of deceit as herself.

"I was so surprised to hear you were going to Closingham, Lishey, dear," said she in the evening.

"Well, you know that Aunt Duggard has always been wanting one of us to go and stay there," answered Lishey, "and now mamma seems to want me to go, so I have made up my mind to do so."

"It seems so sudden," said Nellie.

"The sooner I go the sooner I shall come back," said Alicia carelessly; "I don't know, though, how long I shall stay there."

And so Nellie was satisfied, though she could not help wondering that Lishey, who had always hitherto spoken against her Aunt Duggard, and despised the occupation of her husband, should thus so calmly resign herself to pay her a visit.

When James Loyton received Alicia's letter, he at once saw that his frequent meetings with his master's daughter had been discovered, and he was also sharp enough to see that the letter was in fact a plain request for him to go and marry her. The prize was now in his hands; he should have a lady for his wife; not that he loved her as a man should love the woman he makes his wife, but he admired her, and feasted his eyes on her fine figure and clear complexion, until his admiration grew into a strong desire to have her for his own. Coupled with this desire was the fact of her position. If he had been convinced of the justice of his claims to Warnton Court, he would not have allowed his eyes to rest so frequently upon her, but would have waited until his position had given him the right to choose his wife from what family he pleased. But he did not believe in these claims, so he thought he was doing a great stroke of business in securing a lady for his wife, one whom probably her relations would never quite cast off, and, moreover, one whom he so much admired.

After Lishey had departed, it was a great matter of debate between the parson and his

wife, as to what reason they were to give Loyton for discharging him.

"I am glad Lishey went to her aunt's so willingly," said Mrs. Perry; "if she had refused, I don't know what we could have done; we could not have forced her to go."

"I am rather puzzled at her eagerness to be off after steadily refusing for so long," said the parson.

"My opinion is that she sees her error with regard to Loyton," said Mrs. Perry. "Most probably he has said something to her that she has taken as an insult, and it has opened her eyes to the folly of her conduct."

"Well, now she is gone, Loyton must be discharged," said Mr. Perry.

"And the sooner the better," rejoined his wife.

"What reason shall we give him for parting with him?" asked Mr. Perry; "of course we cannot tell him the truth."

"I think I had better speak to him. I shall find something to say when the time comes," said Mrs. Perry, who was equal to every occasion.

"Elizabeth, my dear, this is something that demands the interference of the master, and

though I shall be very glad of your advice, I have made up my mind to discharge Loyton myself." This was a very bold speech for the parson to make, but his usually quiet temper had been so roused by Dorman's tale, that he had determined to manage the affair himself.

"Very well, my dear, if you will you must," said Mrs. Perry, in a tone of resignation to all and every evil which might arise from such an unwonted exercise of authority, unsupported by common sense.

"But I don't know what to say," said the parson doubtfully; "shall I say that we think of making an alteration in our establishment?"

"No, certainly not," answered his wife, sharply; "people would get to hear that we were making a change, and would at once put it down as a change for the worse, and say that we were reducing our establishment, and that would never do."

And I don't think Mrs. Perry was far wrong. People are always ready to sit and judge and condemn their neighbours. "The A.'s have sold their carriage I hear," says one, with a shake of the head, "I'm afraid they must be going down hill." Or perhaps it runs thus:—"Have you

seen the B.'s new carriage? I wonder how they can afford it." You are liable to adverse judgment whatever you do, and in such a case the best thing to do is to please yourself, for you may be sure that no actions, good or bad, that you may perform will escape the criticisms of those about you, and criticisms that are generally unfavourable.

"I can't tell him he is not a good-enough gardener, because he knows that he suits us very well," remarked Mr. Perry.

Then there was a pause, during which the parson looked doubtfully into the fire, and Mrs. Perry went on energetically with her knitting.

"I think, my dear," said the parson, who during the last few minutes had really been exerting himself to think, but who, now that he did speak, spoke doubtfully, as if he did not quite know how his proposition would be received by his wife,—“we must say that his relationship to the Squire is an objection.”

“We must say!” exclaimed Mrs. Perry: “you have undertaken the management of this affair, and you must do it as best you can.”

Mrs. Perry, although she had so quietly taken her husband's announcement that he himself was

going to dismiss Loyton, felt rather annoyed, and could not help reminding him of that fact in his difficulty.

“Very well, my dear,” he responded, “I dare say I shall find something to say when the time comes.”

Mrs. Perry ceased from her knitting, and looked up at the parson with astonishment. It was indeed strange that he should thus retort upon his wife, and he could never have done it if he had not been greatly roused from his usual state of mind. His wife, however, who did not wish to enter into a dispute with him, said nothing, but merely let a smile of satisfaction at the mess she thought he was sure to get into rise over her face, and, with a toss of the head, she went on with her knitting. The parson also was astonished at his own boldness, and said no more, but took up a book from the drawing-room table and began to read.

But the pause was not for long ; although Mrs. Perry was so much annoyed with her husband, she could not restrain herself from telling him some of her ideas on the subject.

“I shouldn’t say anything at all to him about the Squire, or his own prospects.”

" My dear, what should you say then ? " asked her husband insinuatingly.

" I should say he did not suit us."

" But that would not be the truth."

" The truth, indeed ! " exclaimed Mrs. Perry. " Did not you just a few minutes ago say that we could not tell him the truth ? And pray what did you tell Dorman a day or two ago ? "

" I did not tell him an untruth ; I was particularly careful not to do so."

" But you suggested an untruth to him, and that was just as bad, was it not ? "

" I am afraid it was, when you come to think about it," said the parson humbly ; " but what could I do ? "

" What you could have done I have not thought," answered Mrs. Perry, " but as you seem to have had no scruples then, I think you need have none now."

The parson nearly began to repent that he had undertaken the business, and had not left it to the management of his more energetic wife ; but he would not now give in and own his incapability.

" Besides," continued Mrs. Perry, " to say that he does not suit us would not be an untruth,

if you are so scrupulous ; he certainly does not suit us."

" But he would be sure to ask why he does not suit us, and I should then be in just the same fix," said the parson, in a complaining tone.

Here Mrs. Perry let her vexation again rise to the surface, and answered,—

" Well, you have undertaken this business, and you must get out of it as best you may. I know I should send him about his business pretty quickly."

It was on the parson's lips to say, "you had better do it, then," but his pride restrained him, and he lapsed into silence, seeing that he could get no encouragement in his difficulty from his wife. Besides, he was not quite certain if Mrs. Perry would now relieve him of his task, since he had so decidedly declined her offer before. He had, too, an uncomfortable feeling that his wife was laughing at him, and he was certain that she would triumph still more if he resigned his self-imposed task, so he determined to go on with it.

Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Perry had any idea that matters between their daughter and Loyton had arrived at the state they had. Mrs. Perry

entirely negated any idea that Loyton had a chance of succeeding to the Warnton estate, in spite of Mr. Jeremiah Sleight, and what doubts the parson himself had upon the subject were much deadened by the opposition of his wife; and that Alicia had a thought at all on the subject they never imagined. Perhaps, if the parson had known how matters were, he would not have made up his mind to make Loyton's relationship to the Squire the excuse for parting with him, and thereby in a manner showing him that he thought his chances good, and perhaps tempting him to think of taking advantage of Lishey's behaviour then, if he had not done so before; for Loyton might well suppose that the man who had such ideas about his future position could not be so very angry if he married his daughter.

However, the parson thought nothing of all this, and the next morning he summoned Loyton into his little study.

"Loyton," he said, "my wife and I have often considered how awkward it would be for us if anything were to happen to the Squire while you were in our service."

"Yes, sir," said Loyton, seeing that the parson paused.

"You see, granting that your claim is established, one day you would be our servant, and the next our Squire."

"I shouldn't be ashamed of you," said Loyton, very innocently.

"No, perhaps not," said the parson, amused in spite of himself; "but still, with such a possibility hanging over our heads, we don't care to keep you in our service any longer."

Loyton knew well enough why he was being discharged, so he thought he would tease the parson a bit, and said,—

"I don't mind that at all, sir; I like the place very much, and I hope you won't discharge me for that reason only."

"Well," said Mr. Perry, "I have been talking it over with Mrs. Perry, and we would prefer that you left our service this day month."

"I thought you were quite satisfied with me, sir; I have always tried to do my duty."

"I know that, Loyton," said Mr. Perry, "you have suited us very well; but it would be much better for you, in many respects, if your next situation was not in Warnton Kings."

"I hope, sir, you have no other reason for discharging me?"

Here was a question the parson was not prepared for; if he said "yes," he should have to give the reason; if he said "no," he would tell an untruth; so he steered a middle course, and answered,—

"I can't say there is, Loyton;" immediately qualifying this by adding, "you have always been a good servant to me."

"Then I may look for a situation this day month, sir?" asked the gardener.

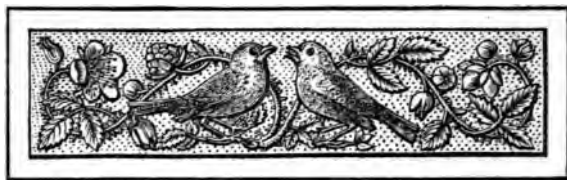
"Yes," said Mr. Perry, "and I hope you will get a comfortable one."

Loyton went out without a very good opinion of the truthfulness of the parson, but he regarded his dismissal with great indifference; the sooner he left Warnton Kings, the sooner he should get to Closingham. He never looked upon the reason given for his dismissal as anything but an excuse; for he thought nothing of his claims himself, and that anybody else should think anything of them, or, least of all, that Miss Perry's behaviour towards himself was prompted by the fact of his having these claims, never entered his head.

It was not long before it was noised abroad in the parish that Loyton was going to leave the

Vicarage, and many reasons, of course, were given for it. Loyton, when asked, would say, "They tell me I don't suit them;" and if further asked why, would say that he did not know. Joe Dorman himself, however, quite saw why it was; he thought, as he knew that Miss Perry had already gone out on a visit, that Loyton was to go after her and marry her. He, however, kept his secret to himself, and did nothing but look, if possible, more important than before; so he listened to the opinions of the villagers, and chuckled at his own superiority, and the satisfaction he would have in saying, when the proper time came, that he had known it all along, and had always said there was something in it. However, a village is like the world in this also, that the stir and noise caused by anything does not last long, but is soon drowned by the talk caused by something else which is new. In consequence, Loyton's dismissal did not long remain the chief topic of conversation.





CHAPTER XIV.

HOW ALICIA SPENDS HER TIME AT CLOSINGHAM.

THE little village of Closingham was one of those few places that seem to have escaped the hand of modern improvement; even the church was unrestored—and in consequence, I suppose, the inhabitants had very little idea of religion. There was indeed a railway station about a mile away, named after the place, but it was on a branch line that led to Pensfield, a large town six or seven miles distant, and it prevented people who had business at Closingham from staying there, as they might otherwise have done, for as it was they stayed at Pensfield, and only came over to Closingham for a few hours, or for as short a time as they could compress their business into.

Closingham consisted of one street of old, irregular, half-timbered houses, broken towards the middle of its length by a market-place; for it had once been a market town and a place of some importance. It was situated on some rising ground at the edge of a large flat tract of land that stretched on one side as far as Pensfield, and which was called Pensfield Marsh. At the back of the village, crowning the hill, was the church, a rambling old building, with a bell tower standing some distance from it in the churchyard. And very proud, too, were the inhabitants of their peal of bells, which could be heard a long distance over the surrounding flat country, and which, being the gift of some rich incumbent of olden time, were of very good tone and tune, so that the Closingham bells were well known in the neighbourhood.

About half a mile from the village stood the Bicknall Farm, a large, picturesque, half-timbered house, with an avenue of old elm trees, in which a colony of rooks had found a home, reaching from the front door to the turnpike road. At one time it had been the residence of the squires of Closingham, but the family had died out years ago, the last of them having been murdered

in the market-place at Closingham, on account of his unpopularity with regard to some scarcity of corn which then occurred, and the representative of the family—a needy man—had sold the Closingham estate, and it now formed part of the numerous acres of a neighbouring peer.

Mrs. Duggard was a little woman of great good nature and kindness of heart; she had never had any children of her own, and therefore had been anxious to know and love her sister's children. Until this time this wish had always been disregarded, but now that one of her nieces was really coming to stay with her, she was delighted. She had not seen Alicia since she was quite a little child, and some anxiety, or rather anxious curiosity, was mingled with her delight, as to whether, now that she had grown up, she would be the loving niece she hoped to find her.

Thomas Duggard, her husband, was one of those farmers whose ideas seem to be bounded by the rotation of crops, and the state of the weather. He was a man of few words, but when he did speak his utterance was generally to the point. One of those old-fashioned farmers who do not take kindly to machinery, he perhaps did

not get so much off his farm as most men do now-a-days, when the ordinary farmer is, or ought to be, a practical engineer as well as a man of capital. Thomas Duggard felt his childlessness even more than his wife, and since his relations lived some distance away and he saw very little of them, he was disposed to welcome his wife's niece with great cordiality.

So when Alicia arrived at Closingham station, she found Mr. and Mrs. Duggard on the platform to welcome her, and she greeted them in the most affectionate manner, although she had nearly forgotten them, and had herself grown into a woman since they had seen her. Looking to her luggage, she had it stowed away in the bottom of Mr. Duggard's spring cart, and jumping in herself, was soon driving through the main street of Closingham towards the Bicknall farm.

Alicia did not find her time hang very heavily on her hands at her aunt's. The life at a farmhouse was quite new to her, and, besides, her aunt's little bookshelf contained many good and interesting books. But her chief delight was a pony, which had been placed at her disposal by Mr. Duggard. Hardly a day passed on which

the weather permitted, without a ride through the lanes on the pony. At her own home she had never had the luxury of a horse to ride on when she pleased, and I think Mrs. Perry would have been somewhat shocked at the idea of her daughter cantering about at Warnton Kings, as she did at Closingham, without a groom after her. But here it was different : she might ride for hours without meeting anything more fashionable than a waggon or cart ; and she took advantage of her liberty. In fact, Mrs. Duggard did not find it nearly so difficult to amuse her niece as she imagined it would be. Alicia steadily refused those few invitations which came to Mrs. Duggard from the neighbouring farmhouses, and seemed so quiet and domesticated, that she quite won Mrs. Duggard's heart. But the fact was, that she had her own reasons for keeping quiet, for she did not wish to become too well known in the neighbourhood, nor did she care that the future mistress of Warnton Court should visit too intimately with persons of such a class.

Things were going on in this quiet way, when one morning Miss Perry received a letter from Pensfield, telling her that James Loyton had

taken lodgings there, and that he would that morning walk along the Clossingham road in hopes of meeting her; and asking her, if she could not meet him then, to fix a time and place of meeting. But it was convenient to Alice to meet him that day, and ordering her pony, she was soon cantering along the road towards Pensfield.

Loyton's heart beat fast as he saw Alicia Perry coming along the road towards him. He had hardly hoped for so prompt a reply to his letter, and sometimes he was even doubtful whether he should receive an answer at all. The four weeks he had remained at Warnton, after Alicia had left, had seemed very long to him, and he was uncertain whether she would not repent the letter she had written to him before her departure from the Vicarage, when she had time to think about it during the quiet life at a country farm. But he did not know the strength of Alicia's motives, or he would not have felt in the slightest degree doubtful.

Although Loyton so much rejoiced at seeing Miss Perry coming towards him, when at length they met he seemed to be seized with an accession of speechlessness, for he could do nothing

but stand with his hand on the pony's neck and stare up at Alicia with a look of mingled satisfaction and stupidity, without saying a word. As she came up he could hardly restrain himself from touching his hat to her as if she was still his master's daughter, but, with an effort, he did restrain himself, and took off his hat to her with an air of awkward politeness. Alicia, too, seemed somewhat confused, and remained silent, closely examining her bridle and toying with her whip. At last, since Loyton still did not speak, her patience became exhausted, and looking at him suddenly, she said,—

“ Well, James, say something.”

“ If I knew what would please you, Miss Perry, I would say it,” he answered clumsily, and in a hesitating manner.

“ You know I like to talk to you,” she replied.

Loyton had never yet asked her to be his wife. Although he had been so familiar with her at Warnton, her manner had been such that he had not been quite certain whether she only sought him for her own amusement, or because she really loved him, and he had enjoyed her society so much that he had been afraid to frighten her away by speaking definitely to her. But the

letter he had received from her, though he sometimes misdoubted it, had emboldened him, and caused him to think that he had only to ask her to be accepted, and in consequence he had made up his mind to ask her this morning. The old fear of offending her, however, came upon him as he stood beside her, but fighting against it, he said,—

“And I hope you know, Miss Perry, what pleasure it gives me to talk to you.”

He paused, but as Alicia did not make any remark, he gathered courage, and plunged boldly into the subject.

“I know what presumption it is, Miss Perry, for one in my position even to think of loving you, but I do love you, I do indeed. Forgive my boldness, Miss Perry, and tell me you are not angry with me.”

A smile of satisfaction came over Alicia's face: here was what she had schemed for and waited for.

“No, I am not angry,” she said.

“I do truly love you, Miss Perry; let me hope for some love in return.”

“Well, then, don't call me Miss Perry, call me Alicia,” she answered, and Loyton, emboldened

by this, seized her gloved hand and covered it with kisses.

"Don't be foolish, James," she exclaimed, snatching it away: "this is a public road; let us walk on."

They did not go far along the road, for after fixing a time and place for their next meeting, Alicia said good-bye to Loyton and cantered off home, not at all displeased that she had at last secured the man who was to serve as her stepping-stone to wealth and position. Nor was Loyton dissatisfied with the day's transactions; he had won the woman he desired, who, he had every reason to suppose, was not entirely indifferent to him. And now that he had her promise, he determined not to be long before he claimed the fulfilment of it, for no place could be as convenient for the marriage as the locality in which they now were. Thus his thoughts ran, while Lishey, on her part, had come to the same conclusion, though from different motives; she wanted to make herself secure as Loyton's wife, and then return as soon as possible to Warnton Kings.

So the consequence was that the rides became very frequent: so frequent, indeed, that Mrs. Duggard one day observed to her husband,—

"How fond Alicia is of the pony."

"Yes. I suppose she has never had the chance of riding before, so it is new to her."

"Do you know her favourite ride?"

"No, I don't," answered Mr. Duggard, "but I think she generally goes down the lanes towards Pensfield."

"I don't know whether it is right to let her go out so much by herself," said Mrs. Duggard doubtfully.

"She is old enough to take care of herself; besides, who is to hurt her?"

"I don't know whether it is altogether right," maintained Mrs. Duggard.

"All new things please; she will soon tire of the pony," said her husband. But Mrs. Duggard was not contented, though she had no positive reason for her discomfort; so she wrote to her sister and told her how fond Alicia was of riding, and that she was out a good deal, but Mrs. Perry in her heart was rather glad than otherwise that Alicia had found something to occupy her time and reconcile her to her stay at Clossingham, and in her answer to her sister, did not seem at all to object to these frequent rides. So Mrs. Duggard was fain to be satisfied since

neither her husband nor her sister echoed her doubts.

Meanwhile Alicia went out nearly every day, generally, as Mr. Duggard said, towards Pensfield, but sometimes in a different direction. Rather more than half way to Pensfield, there diverged from the high road a lane, which led only to some fields, and was nearly a mile in length, and through which in consequence there was no traffic. It was a delightful lane, as those field lanes very frequently are, with high straggling hedges which only left sufficient room for one cart to pass. In this lane Loyton and Alicia were accustomed to meet: she would tie up her pony to some field-gate, while she walked up and down the lane with him. Although Loyton so wished to be married, he had said nothing further to Alicia on the subject, prevented perhaps by the old fear lest he should offend her, which sometimes came over him; but this delay did not please Miss Perry, so she asked him one day:

“ When shall we be married, James ? ”

“ The sooner the better, I think, Miss Alicia,” said Loyton, who even now could not make himself drop the “ Miss ” in addressing her.

“ Well, then, why didn’t you say you thought

so, instead of leaving me to find it out by asking you? You ought to propose such things, and not leave me to do it," said Miss Perry snappishly.

"I didn't know if it would please you," said Loyton.

"Then you should have said it to try."

"Well, I'll say it now ;—Alicia, when shall we be married?"

"James, this is a serious matter; don't approach it with such levity," said Alicia.

And indeed, although Alicia talked so lightly, she felt that it was a serious matter; she could not have gone through with her self-imposed task, unless she had hardened herself to it, and even now she hardly dare think of what she was doing. She was walking by herself in a secluded lane with a man whom, she was obliged to confess to herself, she did not love, and she was making arrangements for her marriage with him; and moreover he was a man, whatever might be his future prospects, who was now in a very inferior station of life to herself; she could not help being conscious of her position, and if Loyton had been observant, he could not but have noticed the flippancy and hardness of voice caused by this consciousness.

"I don't feel serious," said Loyton; "I think marrying the woman you love anything but serious."

"Oh, you don't feel serious then? Then I shall leave you and hope to find you in a better state of mind another day." And Miss Perry made as though she would go back to her pony.

"No, don't run away, dear Miss Perry, for that would really be serious. Stay with me and I will do what you like," said Loyton, stretching out his hand to restrain her.

"Hands off, young man, and I forgive you," said Alicia, theatrically; "and listen to my commands. You must get a license."

"But I don't know how to set about it," said Loyton.

"But I do," said Alicia: "you must find out the clergyman who grants licenses, and you will have to swear before him that you know of no reason why we should not be married, and that one of us had been fifteen days in the parish in which the marriage is to take place. Now, Pensfield is a larger place than Closingham, and as you have been there more than the time, we will be married there. That is all you have to do, so now start off and do it, and meet me the

day after to-morrow in this lane, and if you don't bring the license with you, I won't speak to you."

"Is that all I have to do?" asked Loyton.

"All, indeed! As if getting a license to be married was not a good day's work for any man! James, you are incorrigible; I am going, so run and fetch my pony." And Alicia pointed with her whip to her pony, which stood meekly by a gate some fifty yards down the lane. He was not many minutes before he brought the animal to her, and assisted her to mount. He stood by her silently for a few moments after she was mounted, so she said,—

"Are you not going to say good-bye, James?"

"Yes, indeed," he answered. "But I hope I have not offended you?"

"Offended me? No; but you men are such stupid things; if I were to see a pear on a tree, ripe, and ready to drop, I should stand underneath waiting for it, with my hands stretched out, yes, and perhaps my mouth open too; but I don't think a man can tell when the pear is ripe, much less try to catch it." With this bit of moralizing she cantered away, leaving Loyton gazing stupidly after her, for although he had

some faint idea of what her parting speech meant, he did not fully understand it.

All Alicia's determination and fixity of purpose could not prevent the flush on her cheeks seeming very bright to Mrs. Duggard when she arrived at the farm; her manner, too, had a certain excitement in it, and her talk was involuntarily a trifle louder and faster than usual; all which things seemed to Mrs. Duggard to betoken that something was going on that she was unaware of, and stimulated her uneasiness of mind into positive suspicion, until she again consulted her husband on the subject.

"I don't quite understand Alicia," she said to him that evening, when he came in for the night, and Alicia had gone to her own room.

"What's the matter with her?" asked Mr. Duggard.

"She seems altogether altered lately, and to-day she was quite excited when she came in from her ride."

"I dare say she had had a bit of a gallop, and that might have excited her," suggested Mr. Duggard.

"I don't think it was the kind of excitement a good gallop would give her," said his wife.

"What do you think it was then?" he asked.

"I thought she had seen someone who had annoyed her, or that she was annoyed with herself."

"But she was not likely to have seen anyone she knew."

Mrs. Duggard did not answer the question implied in this sentence, but immediately asked her husband another.

"Why do you think Elizabeth let her come?"

Mr. Duggard looked up, surprised. "I never thought about it. Because she liked to come I suppose."

"I've thought a good deal about it lately, and I don't think my sister would have sent her, nor would she have come, without good reason. I was so glad to have her that at first I did not think about it myself."

"I don't see what you are driving at, Mary," said her husband.

"What if Alicia had made acquaintance with some young fellow they did not approve of, and they had sent her here to get her out of his way," asked Mrs. Duggard.

"Nonsense, Mary, the idea is absurd," said Mr. Duggard, still more astonished; "what foolish things you are talking about."

Mrs. Duggard did not attempt to establish the position she had taken up; besides it was only a supposition, and of course could not be proved by any argument she could adduce. She knew how difficult it was to drive anything new into her husband's head, especially if it was something he did not wish to believe, so she contented herself with saying,—

"At all events I shall write to Elizabeth tomorrow, and tell her what I think. I have no wish to be blamed if anything does go wrong with Alicia."

Hereupon her husband began to get peevish, and remarked, "How suspicious you are, Mary; I shouldn't bother about it."

Mrs. Duggard said no more, and let the matter drop, but nevertheless the letter to Mrs. Perry was written, and posted the next day.

This was Tuesday, and on Wednesday, Lishey, as appointed, again met Loyton in the usual quiet lane, and he triumphantly showed her the license which he had without difficulty procured.

"And now I hope you'll let us be married directly," he said; "when shall it be?"

"Oh, you naughty boy, a day or two ago seeming so indifferent, and now so anxious to get married; why, who can ever depend upon you?" said Alicia, who, now that the fatal plunge was drawing nearer, was growing more flippant, perhaps striving to hide her real feelings under a cloak of levity.

"How can I please you, Alicia? One day you scold me for not being serious, and the next for wanting to get married. What is a man to do?"

"You may rest assured that you do please me, or I should not be here with you now," answered Miss Perry, "so don't trouble yourself on that account."

"I can't help being troubled when you are offended," said Loyton.

"Well, then, I will comfort you. We will be married when—when you please." And she dropped a mocking little curtsey.

"That indeed would be medicine for any man's woes, my dearest," said Loyton, attempting to embrace her; but being repulsed, and half-abashed at his own audacity, he lapsed into silence.

"Let us be married to-morrow, dearest," he soon began again.

"Dear me, what a hurry the man is in," exclaimed Miss Perry patronizingly.

"Yes, let us be married to-morrow, dearest Alicia," he continued; "do think about it."

"No, I can't think about being married to-morrow, James; but I may, perhaps, think about the next day. Let me see; yes, James, on Friday I shall ride into Pensfield to visit old Mrs. Johnson, and put up my pony there; then I shall go out to do some shopping in the town. I should not wonder if I went up to the church door, and how strange it would be if I were to see you there, and stranger still if I were to go into the church with you and find a clergyman there also; would it not be strange, James!"

"Not too strange to be true, dear Miss Perry," responded Loyton. "How well you have arranged it all!"

"Now, no nonsense, James Loyton," said Alicia: "that the clergyman should be there is your business, that I should be there is mine. I shall perform mine, see that yours is done also."

"Indeed, I will," answered he, "you may depend upon that."

"Very well, I will depend upon you for this time."

And then she walked on to where her pony was fastened, and when she was mounted, he said,—

"Then I shall not see you again till Friday, when we shall meet at Pensfield church?"

"No, indeed, I should think not; you ought to be very glad that I shall meet you then instead of being dissatisfied."

"I am not dissatisfied, Alicia; don't think that."

"No, I won't think so badly of you as that; good-bye, till then." And before Loyton could put out his hand or say a word to prevent her, she was already disappearing round a distant bend in the lane.

The next morning there came a letter from Mrs. Perry to her daughter, asking her to return home the following Saturday. The facts that Loyton had now left the village, and that Alicia had been two months away, often caused Mrs. Perry to think that it was quite time for her daughter to return to her; but she had deferred writing to tell her so from day to day, until Mrs. Duggard's letter so frightened her by

conjuring up visions of her daughter making all sorts of acquaintances at Closingham, that she wrote immediately to her asking her to come back. Mrs. Duggard was by no means surprised at this sudden summons, considering it the result of the letter she had written to her sister; and she confessed to herself that she was not sorry that Alicia had received it, for although personally she did not wish her niece to leave, she was quite aware how unpleasant it would be if anything were to befall her while she was with her.

Alicia herself was somewhat surprised at her mother's letter, but she saw at once that to do as her mother wished would suit her purpose admirably, for she would be married on the Friday, and go home the next day as if nothing had happened, and trust to luck to keep Loyton at a distance until the death of the Squire should cause her to acknowledge him as her husband. But she did not care to let Mrs. Duggard see how pleased she was, and said, after she had read her letter, and told her aunt its contents,—

“I suppose I must go, but I have had a very happy visit here.”

"I don't think I can ask you to stay longer as my sister wishes you so much to return home," remarked Mrs. Duggard.

"You won't have a pony to ride when you get home," said her husband.

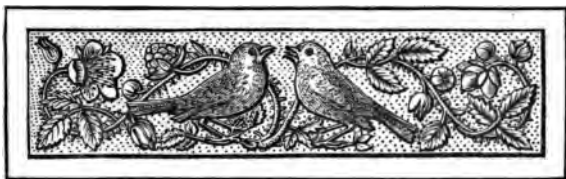
"No, indeed, and I do like riding; I shall make the most of him to-day and to-morrow," answered Lishey, making such an answer to her uncle's speech to pave the way for a long absence on the morrow.

Mr. Duggard did not dislike Alicia, but still there was something about her which prevented him from quite loving her. He was one of those quiet people who notice more of the persons they are thrown in contact with, than those who talk so fast that they leave no time for observation between the flowing words of their conversation. Perhaps it was some knowledge of the innate selfishness of Alicia's character that prompted him to make the remark about the pony, for he might have thought that she would feel greater regret at leaving it than the persons to whom she was indebted for having it at her disposal. And he was not far wrong. Alicia was a stranger to that self-sacrificing love which causes one to give oneself

up to another, and to regard the wishes of that one as a law not to be broken through.

So Alicia wrote to her mother and told her that she would come back on Saturday to Warnton Kings, thereby making Nellie joyful, for she had missed her sister much during her absence, and also by her ready answer causing Mrs. Perry to think that there could not be so much wrong with her, or she would not be so anxious to return as she seemed to be from her letter.





CHAPTER XV.

MISS CROOKENDEN IS LEFT AN ORPHAN.

IRWIN WINNERSLEY'S engagement soon became known in the two villages, and comments were freely passed upon it, but they were generally favourable. "A most suitable match," said some, while others said: "She will make a good clergyman's wife." In fact, everybody said what a good thing it was. How powerful a person "Everybody" is in a country village, and how apt people are to substantiate a statement by saying that "Everybody says so!"

"You must not come here very often," said Emily Crookenden to Irwin one day in her mother's little parlour; "my mother is so weak now, that though she likes to see you very much,

still it is a strain upon her to have to entertain you."

"I'm sure I don't want to do anything to grieve you, my dearest Emily," said he.

"I know you don't," rejoined Emily, looking at him trustfully. "You know I love you, and you will be content with that, although you cannot come to see me often, won't you, Irwin dear?"

"Indeed I will, Emily," answered the curate; and so it was settled that his visits to the little cottage were to be few, though he stipulated that he should sometimes be her companion during her journeys to and from her pupils.

Things went on thus for some time, when it became evident to her daughter that Mrs. Crookenden was getting rapidly weaker, and a dreadful fear would frequently come across her that her mother would not long be with her in this world. She told her fear, as she told all her hopes and fears, to her betrothed lover; but her mother was so visibly declining, that he could hold out to her no hopes of an improvement in her health. He could only counsel her to draw her comfort from on high, and to strive to do her best to smooth her mother's last days upon earth. But

she did not require being told to perform this last duty. Having been her mother's sole companion so long, her love for her seemed part of herself, and she could hardly dare to think of the time when she should be without the beloved invalid to tend and care for. At this time she found her lover's tender care and gentle words a great comfort to her, and was truly thankful to see how her mother trusted in Irwin Winnersley, and looked to him as her daughter's future protector when she should be no more.

One day Mr. Winnersley walked down to Oak-hanger to accompany Emily home after some lessons. After he had walked a short distance, she said :

"I am afraid my mother is very ill ; she wishes so much to see you."

"Do you think she is worse?" asked Mr. Winnersley.

"I am afraid so," answered Emily ; and they both walked on in silence, and spoke never a word till they arrived at Mrs. Crookenden's cottage.

"Will you stay here a minute?" said Emily, throwing open the parlour door. "I will go and tell mother you are here ; she will be so glad."

In a few minutes she came down-stairs again. "Mother says you are to come up-stairs," said she; and Mr. Winnersley followed her gently up the narrow stairs to her mother's room.

Mrs. Crookenden had now for some time been confined to her bed. When Mr. Winnersley entered the room, she turned her face towards him, and stretched out her hand to him, but it fell helpless on the counterpane. She did indeed look ill.

"I am getting very weak, Mr. Winnersley; I declare I can hardly give you my hand," said she, while a faint and forced smile flickered over her face; "but I am very glad to see you, all the same."

"Your daughter told me you would like to see me," said the curate, hardly knowing what to say.

"Yes, I wanted to speak to you—perhaps for the last time," said Mrs. Crookenden solemnly. "I feel that the end is very near."

"Nay, mother, don't think you are so ill as that," exclaimed her daughter coaxingly.

"My daughter won't believe it, you see," said the invalid to Mr. Winnersley, with a faint smile, at the same time putting her hand in her daughter's direction; "but I feel it is so."

"I hope your daughter says the truth," said Mr. Winnersley earnestly.

"No, I fear it is not so, Mr. Winnersley; but I felt that I should so like to see you, to ask you to be kind to my daughter when I am gone—she will have no friend but you."

"Indeed I will," said the young clergyman; and then they three talked quietly together for an hour or more, the mother beseeching for her daughter's happiness, and Mr. Winnersley speaking words of consolation for both mother and daughter. He could see that the daughter's hopes were indeed unfounded, and that Mrs. Crookenden's days on this earth were few, but he did his best to comfort them in their distress, by talking to them of that home above, where all shall meet never more to be separated. Nor could he talk without emotion; again and again tears rose to his eyes, while Emily, although she tried hard to put on an appearance of cheerfulness, could not entirely hide her distress.

Mrs. Crookenden by this time was beginning to feel tired, and Mr. Winnersley, seeing her weariness, rose from his seat, and took the invalid's hand to wish her good-bye.

"You have made me so happy this afternoon,"

said she, tears for the first time starting to her eyes. "Please come again soon."

And after a tender good-bye to Emily, the curate left the house.

He was deeply grieved, for he thought it not improbable that he would never see Mrs. Crookenden alive again. He saw, however, how pleased she had been to see him, and made up his mind to go and visit her again, as she had asked him, very soon. And then thoughts of his love for her daughter crept in, and he could not help thinking that when her mother was no more, there would be no impediment to his speedy marriage. His love for Emily caused, in a great measure, the grief he felt for her mother's sickness; but still the thoughts of that love quite outweighed those of his grief, and during his walk he was more occupied with the sweets of love than the bitters of death. Perhaps, if he had been entirely unselfish, it would not have been so, and he would have thought more of the sorrows of others than of his own contentment.

His forebodings that the death of Mrs. Crookenden was at hand were realized. She grew rapidly weaker before her sorrowing daughter's eyes, but was still happy and cheerful, even in

her weakness, and the third evening after Mr. Winnersley's visit she passed from the sleep of the living to the sleep of the dead, so peacefully and so calmly that Emily, who was sitting at the bedside watching her, knew not for some time the change that had taken place.

Miss Crookenden, as may be supposed, was deeply affected by her mother's death. Although she had long noticed her mother's waning strength, she had not fully realized to herself that the end might be so near, and yet the fact that it was not altogether unexpected caused her to recover from the shock sooner than she would otherwise have done, and she received, too, great comfort from her lover, who sympathized deeply with her in her distress.

Mrs. Crookenden was buried in Oakhanger churchyard within sound of the rippling brook, and where the leafy branches of the limes would wave over her grave in the summer breeze.

It was very lonely for Emily at her little cottage after her mother's death. There was no dear one to run to when she returned from giving lessons or from choir practice, or to sit with during the long winter evenings; no dear one to sympathize with her in those common little

anxieties of life which fall to the lot of all, whatever may be their station. Mr. Winnersley now thought it time to press for a fulfilment of her engagement to him ; but though she was thrown upon him more on account of her loneliness, and had learned to love him better on account of his tender sympathy during the trying time she had just passed through, yet she showed some unwillingness to become his wife, which unwillingness was caused, perhaps, by her very unprotectedness, together with a feeling that now she depended upon him alone.

There was one sympathizer in Warnton Kings who seemed to feel nearly as deeply as Mr. Winnersley the death of Mrs. Crookenden—this was John Pilgrimson, the sweep. One morning he washed his face as clean as he could make it, and called at Mr. Winnersley's lodgings to express his sympathy. The sweep seemed during the last few months to have transferred to the curate the allegiance he once gave to the young Squire ; yet there was a certain patronizingness in his manner towards him, which, if his station had not been so humble, would have been decidedly unpleasant ; but then the sweep was accustomed to have his statements looked up to by the vil-

lagers generally, and doubtless this caused him to assume the air of one who had some kind of authority.

"I'm sorry to hear that Mrs. Crookenden's dead," said he to Mr. Winnersley, who had come out of the house into the little front garden to speak to the sweep; "but she'd been weakly some time, hadn't she, sir?"

"Yes, she was a great invalid, John," responded the curate.

"Ah, yes, she was a nice lady," said the sweep, falling into his absent manner, and continuing, "she was a nice lady; I'd heard of her many a time."

"Who had you heard of her from?" asked Mr. Winnersley.

John seemed startled at the question, for he looked up quickly and inquiringly, and answered very decisively for him: "From Oakhanger people, of course. She was well enough known there, wasn't she?"

"Yes," answered the curate, somewhat surprised at the sweep's manner, "but I should not think she was much talked about."

"Well, everybody gets talked about, don't they, sir?" asked the sweep, relapsing into his

usual tone. "Yes, everybody gets talked of, and if people don't know anything good to say of anyone, they are sure to find something bad; it's the way of this village, and I suppose of other villages too, and the world is made up of villages."

"John, you're quite a philosopher," said Mr. Winnersley laughing, for he had often heard of and had experienced the sweep's moralizing tendencies; "has anybody been saying anything bad of you?"

"I've had plenty said of me, bad and good," answered John Pilgrimson, "but I'm only a poor sweep, and nobody cares for him; they may say what they like, for they can't make him better or worse than he is, and the sweep doesn't care for them."

Mr. Winnersley, who was not without curiosity, had often tried to find out from the sweep his antecedents, but he had always been unsuccessful, for the old man would either turn the conversation, or touch his cap and walk on, if he thought the questions were becoming too personal. The curate, however, thought that the present would be a good opportunity to lead up to the subject again.

"Well, you have been in the parish long enough to have heard all that it has to say," said he.

"Yes, I've been here over thirty years," answered the sweep; "I was a young man when I came." Then it seemed to strike him that perhaps Mr. Winnersley was going to ask him some home questions, for he went on in his melancholy way: "Wouldn't a sweep, obliged to get up in the morning and trudge to his work through the snow or rain, rather be a blacksmith, who has nothing to do but go into his warm shop and laugh at the frost and snow as he stands by his hearth? Would a man be a blacksmith if he could be a farmer, and doesn't a farmer envy the landlord, who has nothing to do but live in his big house? Yes, they all of them envy one another, you may be sure, and everybody wants to creep a step higher if we can, and all that stops them is the want of ability." Here the sweep paused, but he went on again directly, evidently talking his best. "Sometimes a man is a fool, or spends his money in drink, or hasn't got perseverance; that's natural inability. But if a man is a sensible man, and yet don't get on in the world, it's almost certain to be because he

don't want to, and that's forced inability. But, sir," he said, addressing himself more directly to the curate, "you won't care to listen to me if I go on much longer, but I think a good deal sometimes, and I like to say what I think, but I don't talk to others like I do to you."

"Nay, John, I like to have a bit of talk to you now and then, so don't think you're tiring me."

"Well, sir, I haven't much more to say except to wish you a happy life with Miss Emily," said the sweep; "she's a good girl. I suppose you won't be long before you're married now?"

"That depends upon the lady," answered the curate smiling.

"Well, sir, I hope you'll be happy. I must be getting on, so good day, sir;" and the sweep left Mr. Winnersley alone in his little garden. He was much mystified at the sweep. It was evident that he did not wish to be questioned about himself, and that something beyond his own control prevented him from being anything other than he was; but however much more curiosity his questioner might feel from these considerations, the sweep by his conversation showed that he was not willing to satisfy it, and

in fact, seemed to imply a desire that his secret should be respected.

Mr. Winnersley, although he was repulsed time after time by Miss Crookenden, was in no way discouraged, but kept urging his suit upon her. At last, having used all other arguments without effect, he fell back upon his last resource, and that was her mother's desire that she should become his wife as soon as possible after her decease. After some time he gained her reluctant consent to be married in the spring. Her consent gained, he was satisfied. He at once called on Mr. Perry and told him of his intention, for although he thought the parson could have no objection to a married curate, still he considered it right to tell him of his approaching marriage himself. To Mr. Perry it was by no means unexpected news ; he had, of course, long since heard of the engagement, and was not at all surprised that it was soon to be terminated by marriage. So he congratulated his curate, and told him that he hoped it would not affect the relations existing between them. In fact, he considered himself very fortunate to secure such a curate as Mr. Winnersley, who was a favourite with all his parishioners, both high and

low, and who did not object to take a share of the parish work, perhaps greater than could be expected, upon himself. The parson was too lazy and good-natured to feel that jealousy which many clergymen seem to feel towards a curate more popular than themselves. Therefore, so far from disapproving of the intended arrangement, he was much pleased when he was told that the curate had no idea of giving up his curacy.

We must not, however, while we are occupied with the chief personages of our tale, forget those other inhabitants of Warnton Kings to whom we have been introduced, and we must see what Miss Ellen Perry was doing whilst her sister was at Closingham. Mr. Selton kept prosecuting his suit assiduously, and it was noticed in the village that his trap was frequently to be seen entering the Vicarage gate, when it was well known that there was no indisposition in the family; but the fact was, he was taking advantage of that privilege so generally granted to the country doctor, the privilege of dropping in upon families they attend and taking a little luncheon or a cup of tea with them at their accustomed meal times. Mrs. Perry, of course,

knew what his motive was in coming, and she had informed Mr. Perry that she quite approved of him as a suitor for her daughter. He was a young man of good address, clever in his profession, and last, but not least, a cadet of a good old family in a neighbouring county; even had he not been so, it is not certain that Mrs. Perry would have objected to him, since she entertained no such schemes of grandeur for her younger daughter as she did for Alicia, and would have been well pleased to see her settled as the wife of one so rising in his profession as Mr. Selton. The doctor, however, had not yet summoned up courage to put the eventful question to Nellie.

Mr. Lindridge, too, found frequent excuses for a call at Warnton Vicarage, and he also was received with great favour by Mrs. Perry. She confided to her bosom friend Mrs. Larchpole, that she really did not know which of the two young men she would prefer as her son-in-law. Perhaps she leaned a little towards Mr. Lindridge, for he was a clergyman, and although he had no prospect of a living, nor knew anyone who had any influence to procure him one, still the fact of his being in the Church gave him in

her estimation a position not to be attained by other means.

Things were in this state when one day Mr. Lindridge found himself sitting next to Miss Nellie at a dinner-party at Warnton Vicarage. He observed her manner closely, and did all he could to find out whether she favoured him; but though she was kind to him, and seemed to be pleased to talk to him, still he could not draw much encouragement from her behaviour; but it in no way quenched his love for her, and he felt drawn to her by an irresistible attraction, though he could not quite make up his mind to speak to her about the subject nearest to his heart. This doubtful state of mind continued during the time spent by the gentlemen in their forced loneliness after dinner. He longed to go to her in the drawing-room, and yet he knew that probably he should be able to draw but little hope from her reception of him.

At length, much to Mr. Lindridge's delight, the time arrived for the gentlemen to make a move, and proceed to join the ladies. As they entered the drawing-room Ellen Perry had just seated herself at the piano and was beginning a song; she had a sweet contralto voice, and

sang, simply and unaffectedly, the following words:—

“ O mistress, crown’d with faded flowers,
Whose heritage is waning hours,
Why dost thou come so soon?
Thy russet crown was green and gay,
And newly born but yesterday,
In sunny smiling June.

Dost come to tell us all must die:
That life, like summer, passeth by,
And fades as fades the year?
Enough in this world teaches us
That lesson, stern and rigorous,
Without thy presence here.

With withering leaves thy path is spread,
As on thou com’st with muffled tread
And suddenly art by;
So age steals on o’er fading hopes,
And man, unconscious, onward gropes,
And shrinks, that death is nigh.”

Nellie’s simple song kept the room silent until she had finished, a thing that does not often happen with after-dinner singing. It seems to me that society considers that a person sings or plays merely for the sake of covering the hum of conversation, and, so to speak, varnishing over those universal platitudes with which an ordinary mortal at an ordinary dinner-party passes the

time away. And yet a really good performer receives at least attention, if not appreciation; but, alas, how seldom a really good performer is met with in the British drawing-room. We can hardly quarrel with people for not listening to the usual style of music there to be heard. Improved performers would command better listeners.

As the effect of Nellie's song on the company was to produce an unwonted stillness, so the effect on Mr. Lindridge was to cause him to feel a still greater attraction for herself. A vivid picture of the autumn of life rose before him: the hopes and aspirations of manhood's prime fading and withering like the leaves of a tree, until at last they drop, and falling, are lost in the growing old of the world. He felt that such an autumn would lose half its dreariness if it could be shared with such a woman as Ellen, and he felt that he must make an effort to obtain her. But of course he had no opportunity of speaking to her in her mother's crowded drawing-room, and every moment of enforced silence increased his determination; and yet it was a great pleasure to him to hang about her, and he was quite grieved when the party broke up. He

had, however, made up his mind to go the next day and ask her to be his wife, for though he was obliged to confess to himself in his calmer moments that he had but little hope of success, still he felt that a decided negative would be less hard to bear—though for the moment it might be sharp—than the present state of uncertainty, which was a perfect torture to him.

So the next day he found an excuse to call at Warnton Vicarage, and finding that Mrs. Perry and her daughter were spending the day at Mrs. Larchpole's, he immediately invented another excuse for calling at The Lawns. Fortune seemed to favour him, for he found Miss Nellie alone in the library reading some ponderous tome. His heart beat fast, but he applied himself manfully, though with sinking hopes, to the task he had set himself. And then Ellen Perry told him that she had long seen that he cared for her, and that she had tried to show him that she cared for him only as a dear friend. She said that she highly esteemed the compliment he had paid her, but that she had tried to show him that such a compliment could have no charms for her. She hoped that what had passed would not interrupt their friendship, but she trusted that he

would no longer think of her as by any possibility his future wife. And then her mother entered the room.

Ellen had said what she had to say in such a cool and calm manner, that it gave Mr. Lindridge the idea that she was repeating a lesson that she had learned, and the tone of her words convinced him that he had no chance of winning her affections. It was a great blow to him; he had longed for some chance, even the slightest, that at some future time his attentions might become agreeable to her. He saw, however, no hope, and as he returned to Oakhanger he wisely, and like a true gentleman, determined to conquer his love, at whatever might be the cost to himself, rather than pursue her with attentions that he saw could only give her pain. But it was a hard struggle to him; a love once planted in a true man's heart is very hard to uproot. It is not done by one effort of the will alone, but requires days and nights of patient endurance. At last, however, he conquered, but still it was some time before he could meet her without a flush rising over his cheek, or speak to her without a bound of his heart which told him that the ashes of his love still smouldered.



CHAPTER XVI.

ALICIA CHOOSES HER OWN PATH.



THE morning of the day on which Alicia had agreed to meet Loyton at Pensfield church turned out bright and frosty, a fact which she regarded as an omen of good fortune. She had made up her mind to be punctual to her appointment, whether the weather was wet or dry, but she felt that there might have been some difficulty in assigning a reason for riding to Pensfield on a wet day; and therefore the fineness of the day removed a possible difficulty from her path. Consequently she procured the pony without remark, and cantered off on the Pensfield road as gaily as though she were going to take no such irrevocable plunge as the one she contem-

plated. But by constant pondering over the matter she felt more as though she were riding to victory, instead of to take a step which might, though she of course thought it most improbable that it would, land her in great misfortune.

Arrived at Pensfield, she went to Mrs. Johnson's, and putting her horse up there, she told that good lady that she was going to get a few things at one or two shops in the town, and gathering her short habit about her, she started off for the church. Pensfield church was situated upon a hill, and was approached either by a long flight of steps, or by a steep path, which wound round the side of the hill, and led less directly to the summit. The churchyard was surrounded by a belt of limetrees, whose branches stood up bare and leafless into the winter air. Alicia having made up her mind to get the matter over as soon as she could, went straight up the steps to the church, and before she got to the top she saw Loyton awaiting her.

"I am so glad you have come," said he as she mounted the last step, and stood beside him ; "everything is ready."

"You see I have fulfilled my part of the agreement," said she.

And then there was a little pause, while she rested and recovered her breath after surmounting the church steps.

"Come, let me take your arm," said Alicia hurriedly, as if fearful of trusting herself longer without some kind of action to occupy her thoughts, and they proceeded into the church.

They were met inside the door by the clerk, and his wife, who acted as pew-opener on Sundays, dropped a most obsequious curtsey, accompanied by an inquiring and somewhat impertinent look, as they passed; but Alicia noticed neither look nor curtsey, for her eyes were steadily fixed on the ground as she walked up the church.

The clergyman who officiated was a little mild man, whose whole mind seemed fixed on getting through the ceremony he had to perform as fast as he could, and on whose pale face, neither interest, nor curiosity, nor wonder found a place; and yet he might well have wondered as he stood within the communion rails, watching the bridal party come up the church, to see the couple he was about to pronounce man and wife—the bridegroom, though he had a superior look about him, evidently of the working class, and the bride, hanging upon his arm, and wearing instead of

bridal costume a dark cloth riding habit, and still carrying her whip in her hand, yet apparently far above the bridegroom in social station.

The ceremony commenced, the clergyman hurrying on in a cold passionless voice, and Alicia answering her part mechanically and with her eyes still fixed on the ground. At the words, "Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?" the clerk came forward, and as Alicia glanced up at him suddenly, she caught on his face a patronizing and amused smile, which, however, changed immediately into an expression of attention and solemnity when he saw that he was observed. Alicia could not help shrinking as the man approached her, but again quickly cast her eyes to the ground, and seemed to throw herself into a rigid position as if ready to endure anything.

"Those whom God has joined together, let no man put asunder." These solemn words rang out cold and harsh down the empty church, and reverberated amongst the rafters like a mocking laugh. As they struck upon Alicia's ear, a full sense of her irrevocable situation came upon her, and for the first time she lost her self-possession and burst into tears. The clergyman took no

notice, and hurried on, and Alicia, roused perhaps by the sound of his voice, soon recovered herself, and stood again as firm and motionless as at first. The ceremony was soon over, and the new-made wife stood with her husband in the churchyard.

“James,” said she, “let us walk round the path under the trees;” and they walked slowly through the churchyard. The clergyman came out of the church soon after them, but he looked neither to the right hand nor the left, and hurried away down the steps; but the clerk and his wife, as they left the church, stood awhile and watched Loyton and Alicia as they slowly passed along: a look, a remark, a wonder at the apparently ill-assorted pair, and they also set off down the steps and left the churchyard to the new-married couple.

“Well, James,” Lishey began after a short pause, “now I am your wife, what are you going to do with me?”

Now the suddenness with which the marriage had been arranged had quite precluded Loyton from making any plan as to where he should take his wife, and besides, now that he had secured his prize by a chain that could not be broken, he did not feel in any hurry to give up his single life and settle down, so he answered,—

"I have not yet made up my mind what we are to do, for I thought you would like to be consulted about it."

"You good boy! I see you have discovered the first duty of a husband already, that is, to consult his wife in everything. Mind you never forget it, James."

Her husband's answer had quite fallen in with Alicia's views, for we know she had determined to keep Loyton at arm's length until circumstances should make it desirable for her to avow her relationship to him.

"I will always try to be good," said Loyton humbly, "tell me what we are to do now."

"My mother wants me to go back to Warton to-morrow," said Alicia, "and I think I had better go," (she did not say she intended to go,) "whilst you stay here and look out for something to do and somewhere to live; and don't you think we had better say nothing about our marriage until we have made arrangements what course is to be pursued?"

"I think that is a very good plan," said Loyton: "you may be sure I won't be long before I have a home for you."

"Very well, till then I shall go back to Warn-

ton and you will stay here. I think it is best." So this was agreed upon, and after arranging where a letter would find Loyton, he, at her request, left her, and went down from the church by the steep walk I have spoken of. She watched him out of sight, and then herself went slowly down the steps into the town. And the churchyard with its bare fringe of limetrees was left alone.

The next day Alicia left Closingham, and arrived quite safely at Warnton Vicarage, much to the delight of her mother, who was not displeased, now that Loyton had gone, to have her eldest daughter under her own eye again.

The market-day at Pensfield was Tuesday, and on that day all the neighbouring farmers made a point of being there; and after dark on a winter evening the bar parlour of the Golden Griffin was generally full of people having their glass of beer or something hot before they started on their drive home in the cold winter air. During this time the news of the various parishes was interchanged, and various little titbits of scandal talked, or perhaps sometimes even concocted. Amongst this assemblage, on the Tuesday night after the events just narrated, sat Mr. Duggard,

with a steaming glass of brandy-and-water before him, and looking quiet and well contented with himself and all the world, and listening to the remarks of his neighbours without saying anything himself. Then it was that he overheard the following conversation:—

“I hear there was an elopement on Saturday,” said one fat and well-to-do farmer to his neighbour.

“An elopement! Who was it?”

“Well, I don’t rightly know, but I hear the man’s name was Loyton.”

“Loyton! that’s not a this-country name at all events. Who did he elope with?”

“They say she was a very fine young lady, but people don’t know her name.”

Here Mr. Duggard began to get interested, not only on account of the charm and novelty which always seem to cling to an elopement, but also because staying at his house was a young lady who might with truth be called fine, and about whose proceedings, when she was out riding, he was entirely ignorant. The possibility of the fine girl mentioned being really Alicia had not yet occurred to him, but nevertheless he listened with increased attention. A casual

observer, however, would not have noticed his growing interest, for the only difference it made in him was to produce closer attention.

“And who was this Loyton?” asked the person to whom the news was being imparted.

“Someone who had been staying here some time. People say he used to meet her very frequently. She used to ride a little pony, and met him in the lanes.”

Mr. Duggard began to get fidgety; his chair did not feel so comfortable, nor did his brandy-and-water look so warm and cheering as it had done five minutes ago, but he wisely kept his place, thinking that he should soon hear if his worst fears were realized.

Mr. Duggard was not the only one interested in the conversation; another person here broke in, adding his information to the general stock.

“I hear the lady comes from out Closingham way. She was married in her riding-habit on Friday, I am told.”

“From Closingham way does she come? then perhaps my friend Mr. Duggard here knows something about her,” said the first speaker, turning to him as he spoke.

Mr. Duggard did not answer him directly, for

at that moment he was engaged in drinking up his brandy-and-water with every appearance of haste, but when he had finished he jumped up and said sharply, "It doesn't follow that because she comes from out Closingham way I know anything of her. It's time for me to be off. Good night, gentlemen." And with this he went out.

"Why, what's happened to Farmer Duggard?" said the first speaker, in a tone of astonishment.

"I have heard say," said another, who had heard the whole conversation, "that the young lady is one who has been visiting at Farmer Duggard's house."

The first speaker here gave a long-drawn whistle of astonishment: "Oh, that's it, is it!" he exclaimed; "no wonder he ran off so quickly if it was the first he had heard of it."

Another portly old gentleman here joined in. "If it is the young lady who is staying at Farmer Duggard's house," said he deliberately, "she is a parson's daughter from somewhere near Chancebridge, and Duggard's wife's niece."

It was soon known all round the parlour who the lady was that had eloped, or at least who she was supposed to be; and doubtless some of those

present drank their liquor with greater gusto, thinking what a nice piece of news they would have to take home, and mentally congratulating themselves that no niece of theirs had thus brought herself into notoriety.

Mr. Duggard was not of a demonstrative nature. He did not drive furiously home, as many men would have done, and so vent his mortification upon the poor animal in the shafts; but he was outwardly as calm as though nothing out of the common had occurred. His thoughts, however, were by no means so placid, and every now and then bubbled to the surface of this outward calm with a "ha!" of surprise, or a "humph!" of deep cogitation. He was decidedly uncomfortable. He had frequently wondered at Alicia's fondness for the pony, but he had never once thought that she was taking such an advantage of her opportunities. Perhaps in a measure he had been to blame in letting Miss Perry go out so much alone, but he had always considered her quite capable of taking care of herself, and never imagined she could get into mischief in such a quiet place as Closingham. He had not nearly arranged the matter to his satisfaction when he arrived at home, nor had he settled

what share of blame really belonged to him. So he put his horse up, and after seeing that all was safe for the night, he went into the house to tell his wife the news, and hear what she might have to say upon the subject.

Mrs. Duggard immediately guessed, from her husband's early return home, that something unusual had occurred, and when they were settled in the parlour she inquired what brought him back so soon. Now Mr. Duggard was not given to beat about the bush, but said what he had to say without circumlocution; so he did not attempt to break the news to his wife by degrees, but at once answered,—

“Alicia got married the other day.”

“Got married, Thomas! you don't mean to say so?”

“Yes, I do,” answered her husband unpromisingly.

Mrs. Duggard opened her eyes very wide with astonishment, and stared straight at her husband as if he had been suddenly seized with a fit of madness. He made no movement, but kept looking stedfastly into the fire. After a few moments she seemed to recover herself a little, and said, all in a breath,—

"You don't mean it? Who said so? How did you find it out?"

And then Mr. Duggard recounted all that he had heard in the parlour of the Golden Griffin, while his wife listened to him amazed. When he had finished the recital, she said, clinging to the faintest hope,—

"They did not mention her name, then? Well, it may not be Alicia after all."

"The description corresponds too well for that," answered Mr. Duggard; "I am afraid that can't be the case."

"On second thoughts, I am afraid so too. What must be done?"

"I don't know," answered her husband, again uncompromisingly.

"Poor girl!" said Mrs. Duggard, leaning back in her chair, while her husband still stared at the fire immovably.

The silence had lasted some few minutes, when it was broken by Mr. Duggard.

"I can't see how we are to blame," he said.

"No more can I," answered his wife, "but sister is sure to say so, and if she thinks so she will never forgive us."

"Well, at any rate, we can't see less of her than we do now."

"Ah, no!" said his wife, with a little sigh, for she had always loved her sister, and of late years had felt a little neglected by her; "but even if you don't see much of a person, it is pleasanter to know you are friends than enemies."

"I don't see that it makes much difference," said her husband, in whose composition sentiment had no place. His wife, knowing this, did not attempt to convince him, and silence again prevailed for a few minutes; at last, Mrs. Duggard said,—

"I must write to my sister, and tell her."

"I suppose you must, but I don't envy you the job."

"No, it is not pleasant, but it must be done," responded Mrs. Duggard; "I'll set to work now at once; I shall write better now than when I have had time to realize it."

So she went and got out her brass-bound mahogany desk, that had formerly been her mother's, and which was now used by herself on very particular occasions, and set to work to indite the letter to her sister; while Mr. Duggard, having at last satisfied himself that nothing was

to be gained by pondering over the matter any longer, put his feet on the fender, and taking up the local paper, buried himself in its contents ; but that his astonishment was not quite put on one side was evident from the half-suppressed "humphs !" that escaped every now and then from behind its ample sheets.

I must again introduce my readers to the breakfast-table at the Vicarage at Warnton. The snow was falling heavily out of doors, even throwing a grey shadow over the occupants of the room. Prayers were over, but Alicia was not yet down ; she had been late for prayers nearly every day since her return from Closing-ham. Mrs. Perry and Nellie were standing beside a blazing and cheerful fire, the former reading a letter which had just arrived by post, while the latter was glancing over the pages of some new book. Mr. Perry was sitting at the breakfast-table, looking over some advertising circulars of that kind which morning after morning inundate the table of every man who happens to have an address. This calm state of things was interrupted by a cry from Mrs. Perry.

"I won't believe it !" she exclaimed, with nearly a scream ; and as Mr. Perry looked up, she

sank back into an arm-chair, and flung the letter she had been reading on to the hearth-rug, and hid her ashen face in her hands.

“What is it, Elizabeth?” asked Mr. Perry, while Nellie rushed up to her thinking that she was ill.

Mrs. Perry did not speak, but pointed to the letter which lay at Mr. Perry’s feet. The parson was puzzled : he knew of no one whose death was likely to affect Mrs. Perry so much, and besides the letter was not black-edged, as letters conveying news of that description usually are. He took up the letter, and began to read it. He made no remark until he had finished it, when he laid it down on the table, and said, looking towards his wife,—

“Dear me, Elizabeth, it’s very shocking.”

Everyone who has read as far as this will know that the letter which caused so much consternation at the Vicarage, was the letter we saw Mrs. Duggard set to work to indite. It had been no easy task for her, and many were the sheets of paper she had spoilt in the attempt. She would wrap it up most cleverly as she thought, but when she came to read the letter over again, there she saw the sad news standing

out bare and naked. Again would she try to smother it in words, but like the body of Eugene Aram's victim, do what she would, the truth kept peeping out, unhidden and unhideable. At last, in despair of making bad news better, she folded up her letter, and directed it, and in due time, as we have seen, it reached its destination.

When the parson had spoken to his wife, he said to Nellie,—

“Read the letter, Nellie; it is from your Aunt Duggard, and contains bad news.”

Nellie took it up from the table and began to read it with an expression of wonder on her face, which grew into one of concern and astonishment as she approached the end; but she had not time to make any remark upon it before the door opened, and Alicia entered the room.

She saw that there was something the matter as soon as she entered, from the pained expression of her father and sister. She saw too her mother sitting in her husband's chair with pale face and quivering lip, and she saw on the table the eventful letter. She seemed instinctively to feel the danger in the air, and walked defiantly up to the table. Her mother started up from

the chair, and addressed her daughter with beseeching tone and eager look,—

“ Oh, Alicia, tell me it is not true.”

“ What, mother ? ”

“ Tell me you have not married that man Loyton.”

“ Who says I have ? ”

“ My sister.”

Alicia saw that all was known, and that nothing was to be gained by denying the fact, so she made up her mind to face it out. She was silent, and made no answer to her mother.

Seeing that she did not answer Mrs. Perry, the parson asked her the same question.

“ Well, and what if I have ? ” was her answer.

These defiant words aroused Mrs. Perry, and with face now as flushed as before it was pale, and with flashing eyes, she spoke :

“ How could you do so, Alicia ? And then you dare to come back here, and expect us to receive you as our daughter, when you have disgraced yourself, and us, and all belonging to you. Girl, you are no daughter of mine. You not only marry directly in opposition to my wishes, but you have told me a downright lie. You said you could never think of Loyton as your husband,

and now you have not only thought of him, but have actually married him. Oh, the disgrace, the disgrace ; what will everybody think of me ? ” And then she drew herself up and said, hardly, “ No, you are no daughter of mine ; I shall never speak to you again. Go, where you like, anywhere, to your dear husband ; go, I don’t want to see you any more.” And she sank down into the chair, and again covered her face with her hands.

“ Elizabeth, my dear, this is not seemly,” said the parson quietly ; “ this is a serious matter, and must be talked of calmly.”

“ And what if I have married that man Loyton, as you call him ? ” burst out Alicia, who had listened unmoved to her mother’s passionate speech : “ what if I have married him ? I am of age, and have made my deliberate choice, and it is more to me than it is to you. He loves me, and I am satisfied. I will obey you, mother, and go ; the day will doubtless come when you will be proud to say, Mrs. Loyton is my daughter.” And with this she turned and walked slowly to the door, and went out.

“ Nellie, my dear,” said the parson, “ go and talk to your sister ; she will listen to you.”

The parson quite put on one side his usual lazy manner when he was roused by any great event, though he still remained calm; so, when Nellie had left the room, he went and stood by his wife, and waited for her to speak.

"Oh, Edward, Edward," she said, and burst into an agony of tears, "what are we to do?"

"Alicia must leave here to-day; I shall send her back to her aunt's; I think that will be the best place for her at present, until we see what can be done for them."

"I shall never see her again, Edward," said Mrs. Perry; "I can never forgive her."

"I think you had better go to your room and rest a bit," suggested the parson; "this seems quite to have upset you, Elizabeth."

"I will do so, Edward; I can hardly understand it yet."

And Mrs. Perry went to her own room, and Mr. Perry, taking up the letter, departed to his study to think over the matter, and try to realize the situation. And the fire blazed, and the tea-urn hissed, but no breakfast was eaten that morning at the Vicarage. And all the time the white snow came down unceasingly.



CHAPTER XVII.

WHAT IS SAID AFTER ALICIA IS GONE BACK TO
CLOSINGHAM.

IT was twelve o'clock, and the parson's pony carriage stood at the Vicarage door. It was a pitiless day ; the cold gusty north wind blew the snow in white wreaths against the windows, and rattled and shook them in their frames, as if envious of the bright fires within, and mightily striving to get to them to stifle their brightness in its cold and frosty embrace. Mrs. Perry had stayed in her room all the morning, and had steadily refused all her husband's and Nellie's entreaties that she should speak to Alicia, and not part in anger. And now the carriage had come to take her to the station. Mr. Perry had seen her, and told her how irretrievably she had

lowered herself. He told her that he thought it best that she should go back to her aunt's till some arrangements were made as to her future position; that her mother positively refused to see her, or to allow her to remain another night in the house; but in spite of all his speeches, although she listened to them respectfully, she declined to allow that she had made any mistake at all, and reiterated her own satisfaction at what she had done. At the same time she allowed that it would be better for her to go back to Closingham for the present, and that her marriage might seem reprehensible to many people. Nellie, too, had been with her, and had spoken words of sisterly kindness to her, but without in any way causing her to think otherwise of her position than she had done before.

And now she came downstairs, and walked through the hall without turning to the right or to the left. The parson, however, was not able to allow his daughter to leave the house without a good-bye, though Mrs. Perry adhered to her determination to see her no more.

"God bless you, my child," said he, and he slipped a bank-note into her hand. "I will see that you don't starve."

"Oh, papa, how ungrateful I am," cried Alicia, for the first time giving way; but I am inclined to think that she called herself ungrateful because she could not, being so much in the right, be grateful for his present kindness, and not on account of her apparently undutiful conduct.

Nellie, too, was very much affected; she was parting with the sister she loved, who could never again be the same sister to her. She clasped her arms round Lishey's neck, and refused to let her go.

"Good bye, Nellie," said Alicia, who, in spite of all, was very fond of her sister, and gently disengaging herself; "I don't think things are so bad as you may suppose."

"Now you must be off to catch the train," said the parson; "you know, like time and tide, it waits for neither man nor woman," continued he, trying to make a joke, and seem less affected than he really was.

So Alicia got into the carriage, and was driven off, still confident in herself, into the cold and the wind and the snow, while Nellie and her father, he with his arm round her waist, and she with her head resting on his shoulder, watched her turn the corner at the end of the drive and

disappear from view without once turning her head to take a farewell look at the home she was leaving.

It was not very long before the facts that Miss Perry had married Loyton, and that Mr. Perry had sent her away from the Vicarage, were known all through the parish, and variously commented upon.

"She's a rum one," was Sam Cleaver's comment to Thomas Cross, as the latter called in at the smithy to warm himself at the blazing hearth as he trudged through the snow to a distant part of the parish.

Thomas Cross was very earnest about the matter; for as he was the parish clerk, he felt himself implicated in the proceedings of the parson's family, and he in some way fancied that the false step of one of them was not quite creditable to himself.

"I shouldn't think she would do anything with her eyes shut," said Sam. "I always thought she looked like one who knew what she was about."

"I expect that fellow Loyton got persuading her that he would be someone great some day," said Cross, as if apologizing for her.

"I shouldn't wonder if it was the other way on," said Sam. "She might think she was doing a great stroke of business in getting hold of him. She is a bit out of it, though, I fancy."

Joe Dorman also was very puzzled at the course events had taken. He had wit enough to see that either the parson had deceived him, or was now deceiving the parish, and yielding to a sense of his own importance, he at once came to the conclusion that he was taking the latter course. He felt that he was the depository of a very high trust; it did not strike him that it was not a very correct thing for the parson to deceive anybody at all; in fact, he had, on the other hand, a rather high opinion of the parson's cleverness in thus throwing dust in the eyes of everyone but himself. He was more than ever gratified that he had been clever enough to see that there was something in it, and fancying that he knew more of what was in it than his fellow-parishioners, he made up his mind to walk down to Sam Cleaver's, and see what other people thought about it. So he appeared at the door of the blacksmith's shop just as Cross and Sam were talking matters over.

Now Joe, during his walk through the snow,

had been debating in his mind what side he ought to take in any discussion that might arise about the affair, and he had made up his mind not to defend the course Miss Perry had taken, imagining that he would better, by so doing, disarm any suspicion on the part of others that he knew anything about it.

"It's very cold," remarked Joe mildly, as he walked up to the hearth and spread out his hands to the warmth, just as if he had not come to gossip about the one matter of interest in the parish, and as if the other two people in the shop did not certainly know that he had come for that object.

"Yes, that it is," responded Cleaver; "a smith's shop is no bad place in such weather."

"No, indeed," said Cross. "We were just talking about Mrs. Loyton that is now."

"I just came down to have a bit of a talk about her," said Joe, putting off his innocent manner. "What do you think about it, Sam?"

Now it so happened that Cleaver was possessed of a daughter who had been most unfortunate in a love affair, in direct opposition to her father's wish that she should have nothing to do with the man in question, and so he was in no

way inclined to think compassionately of a woman who had misconducted herself.

"I think she's a bad lot, Joe," he answered ; "I've no patience with girls going and making such fools of themselves. She will come to no good, you see if she does."

"I don't know," said Joe meditatively ; "but I always thought there was something in that Loyton."

"Something in him, you say?" exclaimed Cross ; "I should just think there was—but it is all bad. It's not much to his credit to go and entrap a girl in her station to marry him!"

"Don't tell me," said Sam ; "the man may be bad, but unless the woman was just as bad, she need not have anything to do with him. A man may ask, but unless a woman consents, it isn't much good."

"Well, she's gone now, and I don't suppose we shall see much more of her at Warnton," said Dorman.

"The parson is awfully cut up," said Cross.

"I don't suppose he knew much of Miss Perry's goings-on," said Dorman, here telling what was extremely like an untruth in his wish to appear ignorant.

"Fathers can't be responsible for all their daughters do," responded Sam; "daughters think they know a great deal, sometimes."

Now the great friendship that existed between the parson's wife and Mrs. Larchpole had caused some amusement in the parish, and many were the jokes that had been made about it amongst the better class of inhabitants; and, as a matter of course, what the better class said amongst themselves was retailed out by their servants to their friends amongst the parishioners generally.

Thomas Cross was very indignant that the conduct of the parson's wife should cause anyone connected with the parish clerk to be lightly spoken of.

"Let her go and get pity at The Lawns," said he.

"Ah, she is there often enough," said Cleaver, "they say she's no one's friend but Mrs. Larchpole's."

"I think a parson and his wife should be everybody's friends," said Cross, who certainly tried his best, by gossip and otherwise, to become intimate with the affairs at least, if not the persons, of his neighbours, both high and low.

"What's said of her can't be said of the clerk,"

said Sam, poking fun at Cross about his gossiping propensities.

"Come now, Sam," said he, laughing, "the rook should not find fault with the crow for its blackness."

"Perhaps not," answered Cleaver; "but both the dog and the fox eat meat, only the dog eats what is given him, while the fox has to go about and seek his."

Sam was a great deal too sharp for Cross, so the clerk covered his defeat with a loud laugh, in which Joe Dorman joined. Joe had listened in silence, for he was not altogether comfortable at knowing more than he dared tell, and having to tell stories to keep people ignorant of his knowledge, and he thought a laugh, albeit rather forced, a good way of hiding his previous silence.

Here the conversation turned off about parochial matters which have nothing to do with our story, so we will leave these three worthies still gossiping in the village smithy.

Mrs. Perry did not come downstairs again on the day that her daughter left; she was bitterly grieved and mortified at her daughter's marriage, but after all, her grief was caused more by the fact that she had so entirely thrown away

her opportunities, than by the deception she had carried on; and she very much dreaded also the sympathy of her neighbours, knowing that it would only be veiled criticism.

However, the next day she drove down in the pony-carriage to the Lawns to tell her bosom friend, Kate Larchpole, her troubles, and receive the necessary compassion from her.

"Oh, Kate, it is dreadful; what will everybody say?" said she, when they were seated in Mrs. Larchpole's own private room; and then, shading her face from a blazing fire with a hand-screen, and toasting her feet before the same good fire, she went on to tell her the state of the case.

Before she had half finished her tale, however, her vexation completely got the mastery over her, and combined with anger at her daughter's proceedings, and a fear of the criticism of her neighbours, it caused her thoroughly to break down, and the sharp, energetic Mrs. Perry was cowering in her comfortable easy chair, depending entirely upon the words Mrs. Larchpole should speak. At the bottom, nevertheless, there was the stern determination not to give in, and to stick to her original idea of never

seeing her daughter again, but this did not prevent her looking anxiously for Mrs. Larchpole's advice and opinions.

Mrs. Larchpole, although she had a remedy for every ill, and a proper mode of action for every event, yet was without any very great decision of character; her life had been a smooth one; her husband was master of sufficient wealth to allow her every luxury she desired, and so she had never been called upon to make any kind of mental exertion. The consequence was that although her experiences and ideas were very amusing at one of her elegant luncheons, still they did not go very deep, and she was not a very good person to ask advice of in so important a case as Mrs. Perry's. In fact, it was a case which had not occurred before even in her vast experience, and when she had to advise without a precedent she was entirely at sea.

"You must indeed have been shocked, Lizzie; how very dreadful it is!" said she, crossing over to Mrs. Perry. "But don't take it to heart so much; who can tell what will turn out? and perhaps some day you will call her your daughter again."

"Never again, Kate, never again. She has

left me voluntarily, and I cast her off voluntarily," said Mrs. Perry, adding after a short pause, "for ever."

Mrs. Larchpole was very much afflicted at seeing Mrs. Perry's distress; but as she had no words of real comfort to offer, she thought it best to assume a careless manner, and make light of it.

"There is no knowing what time will do," said she; "the daughter of a dear friend of mine eloped in a similar manner. It is true he was not a labouring man, but he was very poor; however, he had a large fortune left him, and so her mother forgave her."

"I can never forgive Alicia," reiterated Mrs. Perry; "I have only one daughter now."

"Don't say that, Lizzie," said Mrs. Larchpole; "say you have two, but one is gone away for a time."

"And I have seen for some time, Kate," continued Mrs. Perry, "that Nellie is rather taken with that young doctor, Mr. Selton; he pays her such marked attention, and I dare say soon she will want to leave me too."

"I have not much opinion of young doctors," observed Mrs. Larchpole, rushing off wildly into

a fresh subject in her endeavour to divert Mrs. Perry's attention from her mortification. "My dear mother used to tell me of a young doctor she once knew, who was accustomed to drive furiously through the town every other day; but she never heard of his attending any one, so it was her belief that he went into the country only to look at a milestone and then return. I knew one myself who used to hire a small boy every Sunday to call him out of church, though I never heard of his having a patient till long afterwards."

Mrs. Perry was obliged to smile at her friend's suddenly assumed dislike of young doctors, and on such narrow grounds. "Mr. Selton is not all I should wish for Nellie, but he has a good practice, and comes of a good old family," she said.

"Ah, my dear," said Mrs. Larchpole, with a moralizing sigh, "we none of us have all we want."

"Perhaps not," said Mrs. Perry, "but it is not every one who is so disgraced as I am."

So these two ladies, cosily sitting over their cheerful fire on that dreary winter's afternoon, came to the conclusion that Mrs. Perry was very

hardly used, and, as Sam Cleaver had said in his shop the day before, that parents could not be responsible for all their daughters did, quite forgetting that if Mrs. Perry had had less ambitious views, her daughter might have thought differently about Loyton's prospects, and all her trouble would have been avoided.

Early night came on, and Mrs. Larchpole insisted upon Mrs. Perry's remaining to dinner at The Lawns as usual, so Mr. Perry was sent for, and he, though not quite liking it, accepted the invitation. Nellie was accustomed to be left out in the evenings at The Lawns, but still she thought it rather strange on her mother's part that she should stay there this night. So she brought her father's hat and coat to him, and as she assisted him to put them on, she made no observation, but resigned herself without a word to a quiet evening. Mrs. Perry by this time had quite recovered her spirits, and seemed to enjoy her dinner thoroughly, but the parson, now that the excitement had worn off, had relapsed into his old quiet way, and did not seem quite pleased that his wife had accepted Mrs. Larchpole's invitation.

About half-past nine the Larchpoles' carriage

was ordered to take them back to the Vicarage, because Mrs. Perry's friend could not think of letting her walk back through the snow; so the carriage drove through the village at ten o'clock, intimating to all who heard the accustomed sound, that Mrs. Perry did not allow her daughter's behaviour to interrupt her usual pleasures for even one day.

Alicia's meditations during the railway journey to Closingham were not of the pleasantest nature; but still she was confident that ultimately all things would turn out as she desired. She had hoped that a longer time would have elapsed before the discovery of the marriage, and yet she tried to persuade herself that she had thought it must be discovered as soon as it had been. But she had chosen her own path and was now obliged to keep to it, although it was not so easy to traverse, even at the beginning, as she had expected; still beyond the thorny track she was now traversing, she thought she saw sunny fields and flowery meadows, and was determined not to be daunted by the brambles and briars which now impeded her progress. She could not help confessing to herself that the world would take a very different view of her

behaviour from that which she did herself, but still she was well satisfied with her position. Nevertheless she felt some difficulty in meeting her uncle and aunt again after her so short absence from the Bicknall Farm, and she could not hide from herself that her proceedings, when she was there before, might appear somewhat ungrateful.

So when she arrived at Closingham station, and had to walk up to the Bicknall Farm through the dreary snow, her steps lagged somewhat in spite of the cold ; but as she neared the farm she determined more and more to put a bold face on the matter, and when she rang the front-door bell she was as self-possessed as ever. And Mrs. Duggard herself opened the door for her.

Her sudden arrival was not unexpected by her aunt, and she had debated within herself how she was to receive her. Her kindly nature, which could hardly be brought to blame any one, but made allowances for even a convicted wrong-doer, speedily caused her to determine upon receiving her as if nothing unusual had occurred, and she knew that her husband would not really object to her doing so. She had not communi-

cated any of her ideas to her husband, knowing that his stern and practical nature would afford her no help in her sentimental difficulties ; she was aware, however, that he, too, anticipated his niece's return, though he did not expect it so soon as it had really taken place.

Mrs. Duggard embraced her niece tenderly, and led her into the sitting-room before she spoke more than the usual words of greeting. Her husband, who was debarred by the snow from his usual out-door occupations, was reading by the fire, and looked up surprised at his niece's entrance.

"Well, niece," said he, without even rising to greet her, "you have not been long away this time."

"No," answered she ; "I have not been long away from the dear old farm."

"People generally like the place where they do their courting," said he quietly.

Alicia looked confused, but Mrs. Duggard came to her relief with an intimation that she would find her room as she left it, and suggested to her that she should go and rest after her tiring journey.

So Alicia went off upstairs, and after she was

gone Mrs. Duggard came and sat down by her husband, who had not let his niece's arrival disturb him so much as to cause him to put down his book.

"Well, and what's to be done now?" said he to his wife gruffly.

"We must keep her until her husband can find her a home," said his wife.

"She ought to go to her husband at once," said Mr. Duggard uncompromisingly.

"No, my dear, I don't think it would be kind if we were to make her do that," suggested Mrs. Duggard coaxingly.

"I do," said her husband still more decisively; and putting down his book he continued, "Look here, Mary; she did not consider our house good enough without running after this Loyton, and I don't think she can complain if she is asked to call his house hers for the future."

"Perhaps she could not complain," observed his wife; "but sometimes justice is very hard, and after all she is my sister's child."

"The child of a pretty sister, indeed," said Mr. Duggard; "I don't think there is much doubt but that your sister knew that Alicia was

in some scrape, and so she sent her suddenly here."

"If she did, she sent her here hoping that we should cure her of her fancies."

"I never had much opinion of your sister's sudden friendliness; she very likely thought that if her daughter did do wrong she should not be at home when she did it, and I think she should have given us some warning."

"How could her mother warn us, without condemning her daughter?"

"If her daughter was as bad as she has turned out to be, it could not have made her worse."

"I think we anyway ought to blame ourselves for not looking after her better," said Mrs. Duggard.

"I don't," said her husband shortly, and then he took up his book as if to signify that he had said all he was going to say, and meant to keep to it.

"At all events, Thomas, don't speak to her harshly to-night, and let me manage it."

"I won't say a word about it, Mary," answered he, "you are much fitter to talk to her than I am; but I can't help thinking that we have been badly used by both mother and daughter."

With these words he settled himself again to his book, and Mrs. Duggard sat by him thoughtfully looking into the fire, until at last her niece came downstairs again.

The evening passed quietly; Mr. Duggard was still absorbed in his book, looking up at intervals to hope that the frost was going, or to utter other equally general remarks, while Alicia toyed with some fancy work she had managed to secure in her hurried departure from home, and Mrs. Duggard employed herself in household mending.

Bedtime came, and Mrs. Duggard followed her niece upstairs, thinking that her room would be a good place in which to have a quiet talk with her. Alicia was not unwilling to explain matters to her aunt, for although she knew that she was quite right, still she felt that appearances were against her, and might require some explanation. So she waited quietly for what her aunt should say.

“My dear Alicia, how could you go and get married?” began Mrs. Duggard.

Here at first Alicia was puzzled; could she own that she loved Loyton? It was a fact that she did not love him as a wife should love her

husband, but she could not confess her ambitious motives to her aunt, so she, without any scruples, answered what she knew to be untrue, "Because I loved him, aunt."

"But he is so much below you in station," replied Mrs. Duggard.

She knew nothing of Loyton's prospects with regard to the Warnton estate, or of his relationship to the present owner thereof, and was therefore much astonished when Alicia replied, regardless of the fact that it was also a reflection on her aunt's family.

"But not in birth, aunt; he has ancestors quite as good as mine."

Mrs. Duggard did not answer this remark, both because she knew her ancestry was not very good, and because she did not wish to enter into a long disquisition on Loyton's descent, but rather wished to avoid all unnecessary reference to him.

"What are you going to do, Alicia?" asked she, after a short pause.

"I can't say that I have made any plans," responded her niece, with a certain vacancy of manner. She hoped that her aunt would propose that she should stay with her.

"Mr. Duggard says you ought to go to your husband."

It was a great blow to Lishey to find that her expected refuge was in danger of being taken away from her. We know that she did not intend to live with her husband unless she could not possibly help it, until circumstances altered, an event which she was daily expecting; and as she had felt that her mother would not have her at Warnton when her marriage was found out, she had looked to her aunt to find her a temporary home.

"I don't think he has found a home for me yet," said Alicia.

"Does he know that you are here?"

"I have not told him. Of course, I have not had time," she added apologetically, seeing that her aunt looked surprised.

"He must provide you with a home," said Mrs. Duggard.

"I had hoped, dear aunt, that you would let me stay here for a little," said Alicia.

"Thomas won't like it," suggested Mrs. Duggard.

"But he must provide me with a home first of all," said Alicia, using her aunt's very words,

and seeing that that was the best if not the only way of securing what she wanted.

"You have been very hasty."

"Perhaps so; perhaps I have been hasty, but I have married the man I love, and that can't be very wrong, can it?"

Alicia now saw the line she ought to take. If she could cause her aunt, and through her, her uncle, to dwell upon the hastiness of the proceeding rather than its other features, she might at last gain her ends.

"Yes," she continued, in a moralizing manner, receiving no answer from her aunt: "I have been rather hasty; I ought to have seen that he had a home to take me to, ought I not, aunt?"

"I'm sure I think so," said Mrs. Duggard wearily.

"But he will get me a home as soon as he can, and until then, I may stay here, may I not?" asked Lishey.

"I should like it myself," said Mrs. Duggard, whose kind heart could never prompt a cruel saying. "But what about your husband? Perhaps he will take lodgings for you?"

"I will write to him to-morrow and find out what he means to do."

"Well, dear Alicia, I will see if I can persuade Thomas to our view of the case. I am sure you must be very tired, so I won't stay here any longer." And she wished her niece good-night.

Alicia went to bed not altogether dissatisfied ; she evidently had her aunt on her side, and from what she had observed, she knew that her uncle, though sometimes obstinate, often modified his views to meet his wife's ; and so she thought she could reckon on a stay of some duration at the Bicknall Farm.

Mrs. Duggard attacked her husband on the subject when first she saw him after leaving Alicia.

"Loyton has not a place to take her to."

"Then he ought to have : he shan't come here dangling after her."

Here Mrs. Duggard saw an opportunity : this was a kind of admission on his part that his objection was to Loyton himself and not to her niece, but she did not therefore at once suggest that Lishey should remain, but thought it better to beat about the bush a little longer.

"Of course Loyton will be as quick as possible in getting a home for her," said she.

"I doubt it."

"But he married her."

"But we don't know why: he may have repented."

"We can't tell that, and we ought not to condemn him without a cause."

"Perhaps you are right in that, but I don't like him."

"I think we ought to give him a chance, however bad he may be, and keep Alicia till he can take her," insinuated Mrs. Duggard.

"He ought to take her at once," said her husband, making a fight for his original point, but evidently wavering.

"But if he has not prepared for her, we must keep her till he has," continued his wife, now waxing bolder.

"Well, then, if he is not too long about it; but I won't have him here," he added, showing fight to the last.

"Well, we'll talk about that afterwards," said Mrs. Duggard, for she was well satisfied with what she had gained, and did not wish to press her husband further at that time; and he, too, made no objection to deferring the conversation, for long arguments were not in his line and he had had quite enough of it; besides, he was tired and wanted to go to bed.

Thus it was that Alicia took her place at the fireside at the farm without further remark. She wrote the next day to her husband fixing a meeting with him ; and then he promised to look out for a situation.

"You are pretty comfortable where you are, aren't you, Alicia?" asked he.

"My aunt and uncle are very kind to me."

"I'm afraid I can't find you such a comfortable home," said Loyton doubtfully.

"Aunt says I may stay there till you do," said Alicia, "so you may look well round."

"Perhaps if I take a little time I may find something better than I can find at once," suggested Loyton.

"Of course I shall be glad to get a home, James," said she, "but I should be sorry for you to lose a good place in the future by taking a bad one now."

"Well, I will look out for something. But I shall see you sometimes, of course, Alicia?"

"You can't come to the farm, but I can come to see you," answered Alicia.

And so they parted, having thus mutually consented that there should be no hurry in taking a house and living together.



CHAPTER XVIII.

JAMES LOYTON GOES TO ROSEWORTH.



O the long winter passed away, and returning sunshine found Alicia still at the Bicknall Farm. Mr. Duggard had indeed complained to his wife once or twice about her long stay there, but latterly he had accepted the situation, and indeed had become so accustomed to her presence that he would have missed her very much had she left; but this he mentioned to no one, not even to his wife. For Alicia had tried to conciliate him in every way she could, and to make herself agreeable to him by every little attention she could think of. Her nature, however, was not a grateful one, and her attentions were not prompted so much by gratitude to him

for finding her a home, as by the idea of making herself so pleasant to him that he would not wish to send her away. So that it was only, after all, more or less an exhibition of selfishness. Mrs. Perry had held no communication with her daughter, but the parson had written her many kind fatherly letters, enclosing frequently bank notes, while Nellie was a constant correspondent. They had neither of them, however, caused her to feel the slightest repentance for her conduct. Disappointed she was, indeed, that the cloud should rest upon her, and that it should continue so long, but she was as confident as ever that it would ultimately disperse.

At Warnton Kings things were going on as quietly as ever. Joe's little parlour at the Warnton Arms had been much used by the village gossipers during the winter, but by this time Miss Perry's elopement had ceased to be the chief topic of conversation. John Pilgrimson, too, was pursuing his calling in the village, but age was beginning to tell upon him, and he was if possible blacker than ever.

Miss Crookenden still kept her place as organist at Oakhanger. She was not to give it up till midsummer, and all Mr. Winnersley's

entreaties could not induce her to be married until after that time, so he was forced to wait. She had left the little cottage where her mother died and was now the guest of some friends of hers in the same village, and there Mr. Winersley used to visit her.

Loyton and his wife frequently met in the little lane both knew so well; the lane in which they had met when Alicia was before staying at the farm, and in which their marriage had been agreed upon. The pony was in use as regularly as ever, though every time it was taken out caused Mr. Duggard to give vent to a "humph!" of dissatisfaction, or a "ha!" of displeasure, though he very seldom made any other remark. It brought back to him all the unpleasantness connected with his niece's former visit, and he liked his niece's presence best when he most nearly forgot that she was a married woman.

These walks of Mr. and Mrs. Loyton's had not passed without reference to Loyton's providing a house for them to live in, for though neither particularly wished to abandon their present independence, neither wanted the other to know it. More frequent interviews with his wife, however, had considerably modified Loyton's wish to

continue his single life, and at the present time he had come to think that a house of which Alicia should be mistress would be no bad thing, and his efforts to find a suitable situation were proportionately increased. He had therefore advertised in a newspaper, stating his wants, and had received a letter offering him a very good place as gardener; and now it only required that Alicia should consent to the arrangement for it to be carried out. So one afternoon in May, Loyton appointed a meeting with his wife, and hastened to it, thinking that he would gain a very easy assent to his proposition.

"I have heard of a very good situation, Alicia," said he, as soon as the first greetings were over.

Alicia's first idea was to ask when he was to take it, without inquiring what it was; thereby indicating that she was more anxious to know when her present satisfactory mode of life should terminate, than what her husband was going to provide for her.

"When are you to go to it?" she inquired.

"At midsummer," he answered.

"How did you hear of it?"

"I put an advertisement in the paper a few weeks ago."

Alicia had in a measure lost her flippant manner in her intercourse with Loyton, but this communication from him caused her to resume it, since it was so disagreeable to her, and she did not wish to show it in any other manner.

"Oh, you good boy! How anxious he is to get a home for his wife! Why did he not tell his wife what he was going to do?"

"I thought you would be pleasantly surprised, Alicia."

"I am surprised indeed, James," said Alicia, sobered by the prospect before her, which she did not appreciate very highly. Then it occurred to her to ask what the situation was.

"And what are you going to do, and where are you going to do it?"

"I am going to be head gardener to Sir Lionel de Carey, at Roseworth Park."

"Roseworth Park! What a pretty name! I hope the place will be as satisfactory," said Alicia, resuming her flippant and mocking manner.

"I thought perhaps you would like to go over with me to Roseworth Park, and see what sort of a place it is," suggested Loyton.

"Is it far away?" asked his wife, who was not altogether well pleased with the business, and

was inclined to make any objection she could without absolutely refusing to have anything to do with the scheme.

"It is an easy journey there and back in the day. I believe it is a very satisfactory situation for us."

"Well, I think I should like to see Roseworth Park before I take up my residence there," said Alicia, with mock stateliness; "so we will go. When do you intend to go?"

"When you please, if you will go with me."

"Very well; if you will let me know what day you think of going, I will go also."

When Alicia got back to the Bicknall Farm, she went up at once to her room to have a good think over her position and her husband's scheme. She did not know at first what to do; whether to refuse to have anything to do with her husband's new situation, or to fall in with his views and accompany him there. She did not allow any other view than whether it would be pleasant to herself to come into consideration. Whether her presence at the farm was pleasing or otherwise to her aunt and uncle, or whether they would wish her to leave or not, never once entered her mind. She allowed only her own benefit or

pleasure to weigh with her in her decision. So she came gradually to think that it would not be an entirely unpleasant thing to be the gardener's wife at Roseworth Park, if it was at all eligible; at all events it would be as well to go and see the place, as any objection on her part would then have more weight, and if she herself saw it she might find some good grounds for possible objections.

Roseworth Park was the English seat of Sir Lionel de Carey, and was situated in one of our midland counties. The gardens and pleasure-grounds were not extensive, but were extremely well kept and very pretty. It was evident, on the first glance, that the head gardener at that place had a very pleasant situation, and no very great amount of work to do. The cottage assigned to the gardener was embowered in one of the prettiest parts of the shrubberies, with tall trees behind, and a little grassy garden of its own in front of it, sloping down gradually to a stream which flowed through the grounds and formed a lake in the park beyond, and over which the path to the cottage was carried by a rustic bridge. In fact, the gardener's cottage was so lovely in itself, surrounded by a belt of dark

forest trees, with its white rose-covered walls and heavy thatched roof, and with its pretty well-kept garden, that it was one of the most frequented spots in the whole grounds, and was invariably shown to visitors to the park.

Alicia could not help being delighted with the park and gardens, which were looking lovely when she visited them, with the bright spring sun shining out upon the fresh green leaves of the trees and shrubs; nor could she help liking the cottage in which the gardener was to reside. To be the gardener's wife, to have the privilege of walking about the grounds as freely as the owner thereof, was no small advantage in her eyes, and if she was to live with her husband at all, it would have been difficult to find a place where the outside circumstances would so much modify the disagreeables within.

Loyton had finally arranged with his future master while his wife was further exploring the grounds, and was to take up his residence at Roseworth Park at midsummer. Mr. Perry had answered Sir Lionel de Carey's inquiries as to character and capabilities quite satisfactorily to the baronet, though of course Loyton's present situation was a great advance upon the last. I

think, if the truth were known, the parson might have, perhaps unconsciously, spoken too highly of Loyton's accomplishments, feeling that the better the place he secured the better it would be for his wife. Mr. Perry had not told his wife of the application for Loyton's character, and he thought he was justified in not doing so by Mrs. Perry's continued indifference to her daughter's proceedings, and he was besides fearful of raising such a domestic storm by even proposing to give Loyton a good character, that his peace and quietness would be destroyed for an indefinite time, and his peace and quietness he valued very highly. He had confided only in his daughter Ellen, and she had, unconsciously, seconded him in his wish to give Loyton as favourable a character as possible, and so increase the chances of giving her sister a comfortable home.

Alicia had only told Mrs. Duggard that she was going out for the day with Loyton, and had not mentioned where or why she was going, not intending to say anything about it unless she decided to go ; but having thoroughly considered the matter, she came to the conclusion that the gardener's cottage at Roseworth Park would in many respects be a favourable exchange for the

monotony of life at the Bicknall Farm, and made up her mind to go.

"Aunt, James has found a place," said she the next morning after breakfast was over, and Mr. Duggard had gone off about his farm, for she did not particularly care to talk about her husband before him.

"Has he?" was all the remark Mrs. Duggard made.

"Yes, aunt; and I am going to live with him."

She was truly sorry to lose her niece, who had been a pleasant companion to her during the past winter. "I shall be sorry for you to leave us," said she, "but it is the right thing for you to do, Alicia. Where are you going?"

"James has taken a situation as head-gardener to Sir Lionel de Carey at Roseworth Park."

"You are very fortunate; it is a pretty place you are going to."

"Yes, I was over there yesterday. Our future house is simply lovely," said Alicia enthusiastically.

When Mrs. Duggard told her husband that Alicia was going to leave the farm, he was much annoyed at her determination, but instead of

making any remark which would lead one to suppose that such was the case, it only aroused his old opposition to her coming there at all, and he said,—

“Quite right, too ; she has been idling here long enough.”

This took Mrs. Duggard by surprise, for she had come to think that latterly her husband had quite acquiesced in Alicia’s presence.

“I thought you didn’t object to her staying here now, Thomas,” said Mrs. Duggard.

“What was the use of objecting ?” asked he pettishly. “When you women set your minds on a thing you’re pretty sure to get it, aren’t you ? But Alicia has not been badly behaved while she has been here this time,” he continued, modifying his energetic utterance.

“I have been pleased to have her,” mildly remarked Mrs. Duggard.

“Well, so have I, in a way,” said Mr. Duggard, after a short pause, and quite giving in, “and I hope they will do well at Roseworth Park.”

“So you are going to leave us ?” said Mr. Duggard to Alicia the first time he saw her after this conversation with his wife.

"Yes, uncle," answered Alicia, "but I have been very happy here."

"So you ought to have been," said Mr. Duggard, letting his old vexation come to the top at the mere idea of her going to live with Loyton.

"I hope you think it is right to go?" said Alicia mildly, wishing to mollify her uncle.

"Right? Of course it is," said Mr. Duggard. "It would have been right long ago."

Alicia did not quite know what to say, for though she did not much care what her uncle really thought of her, still she wished to part friends with him, so that he might not be unwilling to receive her again at his house if circumstances should cause her to wish to return. Her remark therefore was,

"We don't do right always."

"And sometimes we don't try," sharply responded Mr. Duggard.

"I am sorry to leave you, all the same," remarked Alicia.

"Well, niece, I'll give you my best wishes," said Mr. Duggard, and Alicia felt that this was about as far as she could get her uncle to go, and with it, indeed, she was satisfied.

She wrote a letter to her sister, thinking that her gentle influence at Warnton Vicarage would cause her news to be better received than if it were otherwise communicated.

Nellie told her father first that Alicia was really going to Roseworth Park, for though the parson had answered Sir Lionel's inquiries as to Loyton's character, he did not know that he had actually obtained the situation.

Mrs. Perry received the news when it was communicated to her by her daughter with unmoved countenance; the only way by which she showed that she had even heard what her daughter said was by an impatient movement in her chair. After a short silence, during which Nellie came and stood by her mother's side, Mrs. Perry remarked,—

“I wish to hear nothing about Mrs. Loyton.”

“I thought it right to tell you, mother, where she was going to live,” said Nellie, in a coaxing manner, for she still loved her sister and it pained her that her mother should so completely have cast her off.

“It is nothing to me,” said Mrs. Perry; “let me hear no more about it.”

And so Nellie was rebuffed in her attempt to

get some word of acknowledgment that the movements of her sister were of interest to her mother even in the slightest degree, but she made no further mention of the matter. She and her father both wrote to Alicia giving her all good wishes for her happiness in the station of life she had chosen, and in his letter the parson enclosed a substantial contribution towards furnishing her new abode, and in Nellie's letter was mentioned the fact that her mother was as embittered as ever against her. But Alicia expected this, and did not allow it in the least to trouble her or interfere with her proceedings.

So Loyton and his wife took up their residence at Roseworth Park: Loyton himself went first and got the house ready for his wife, and then Alicia joined him there, having parted from her aunt and uncle in the most friendly manner.

Irwin Winnersley and Emily Crookenden made the best of the fine spring weather, and took frequent walks in the neighbourhood of Oakhanger and Warnton Kings. One of their favourite walks was to the pretty little churchyard at Oakhanger where her mother lay peacefully sleeping under the green turf. Under the shade of the fresh green lime-trees used to sit

the curate and his lady-love, talking over their past sorrowfully, their future hopefully; and many times when thoughts of her dead mother rose to her mind, tears would flow unbidden to her eyes, tears that would cause her lover to use his best endeavours to paint a happy future—a future such as that dear mother would have desired, and did desire when she was present with them in this world; and then a smile would come over her face driving away the tears as the sun drives away the morning mist.

On one occasion, while they were in Oakhanger churchyard, Mr. Winnersley pressed Emily to fix a day for their marriage. It was now only a few weeks to Midsummer-day. He had everything ready for his wife at his home: the arrangements had been a constant source of interest to them both during the last spring, and now it only required her to fix a day for the ceremony.

“Your engagement at Oakhanger will soon be over now,” said Mr. Winnersley, “and then I must beseech you to fulfil your promise to me.”

“Do let me wait a little while longer,” said Emily, looking at him entreatingly.

“But you know our house is quite ready for

its mistress," urged the curate, taking the liberty of putting his arm gently round her waist as they sat on the sloping grass, and the stream trickled in the valley below.

"I can't say any time, Irwin, indeed I can't," said Emily, half inclined to cry.

"Then let me fix the time, Emily dearest," said Mr. Winnersley.

"You may do as you like, but I don't say that I shall agree," said Miss Crookenden, letting smiles get the better of her tears.

"I shall fix the first week in July," said Mr. Winnersley decisively, as if it were already a settled thing.

"It is very soon," objected his companion, and then she continued, reluctantly, and in a low voice, "but I will give my consent."

"This is indeed happiness," said the curate, and there was a long pause.

So it was settled that the first week in July should witness their marriage, and, moreover, after some pressing, Mr. Winnersley got his lady-love to agree to a certain day in that week.

The first week in July soon came, and on a glorious July day, with the summer sun gilding everything with its radiance, Irwin Winnersley

and Emily were made man and wife at Oakhanger church. She was married from the house of those friends who had been so kind to her since her mother's death, and who would not let her leave them until she was Mrs. Winnersley.

The wedding was a very quiet one, in accordance with Miss Crookenden's wishes, but nothing could prevent the villagers of Oakhanger from putting up a triumphal arch of evergreens on the road to the church ; and Sam Cleaver, too, from Warnton, was determined to have a finger in the pie, and had made some large paper roses with which he decorated the laurels which composed the arch. This arch was built close to the school, and as the bridal party passed underneath, the school children were arranged on each side with flowers in their hands, and raised a hearty cheer as they threw them under the feet of the wedded couple as they walked from church.

The old sweep also was there with his black grimy face conspicuous amongst the smiling faces of the children ; not that he was not as pleased as they were, and smiled, ay, smiled until a tear stole down his cheek, and left a track

on his sooty face, a face so sooty that smiles and tears were alike nearly undistinguishable.

After the wedding they went off into a quiet little village in North Wales, where they spent their honeymoon ; then they came back and took up their abode in the little house they had prepared for themselves in Warnton Kings.





CHAPTER XIX.

HOW ALICIA LIKES HER POSITION.



SOON after he came back to Warnton Kings, Irwin took his young wife to his father's, where his visit had been long looked forward to by his sisters, who, unlike sisters-in-law in general, were most anxious to welcome their brother's wife. Their brother had been so little at home since he first went to school, some fifteen years since, that they were without that sense of property in him which often gives rise to jealousy. So the visit was a very pleasant one, and the young couple returned to their home well satisfied.

A great friendship had arisen between Mrs. Winnersley and Ellen Perry, who was a frequent visitor at the curate's little cottage, for it was

not far from the Vicarage. Emily soon became acquainted with the history of Alicia's elopement, which she had only known before from Mr. Winnersley, and therefore imperfectly, for his was a nature that did not take much interest in the domestic affairs of others, even his own vicar's.

"How very strange it is that Loyton and his wife should go to live at Roseworth," said Mrs. Winnersley to her husband one afternoon when Nellie, who had been talking of her sister, had left; "it is where the baronet, who was such a great friend of my uncle James, lived."

"I have a great mind to ask John Pilgrimson if he knows anything about the de Careys; I heard him say once that he knew Bellesbury, the nearest town to Roseworth, when he was young," said her husband.

"Do so," said Emily; "I should like to hear something about them, for mother knew no more than she told you."

Mr. Winnersley met the sweep pushing his old sooty cart along the high-road not many days after this conversation with his wife, so he stopped him and said,—

"Good day, John; you are the very person I wanted to see."

"Well, sir, I am on the road most days ; there is not much difficulty in meeting me," said the sweep.

"I wanted to ask you about Roseworth Park ; it is close to Bellesbury, and I heard you say once that you knew that town."

The sweep looked up suddenly, and said, sharply for him,

"Bellesbury ? When did I ever mention Bellesbury or Roseworth either ?"

"Some time ago now, John ; why, you look quite astonished !" said the curate.

The sweep had quickly lost the momentary flush that passed over his face as Mr. Winnersley mentioned Bellesbury, and he relapsed into silence, and let his eyes rest on the ground at his feet as the curate went on :

"Isn't there some tale of one of the de Careys vanishing, and never being heard of again ?"

"Yes, sir, I have heard so."

"He was a bad man, wasn't he ?"

"Yes, he was," answered the sweep solemnly and earnestly, "he was a man who had committed the worst of crimes, not only against the laws of the land, but against the laws of honour

also ; for there is honour even amongst thieves ;” and the sweep paused.

“ One might suppose he had done you some injury, John,” remarked the curate, half amused at the old man’s manner.

“ Me, sir ? ” questioned the sweep, looking up quickly as if somewhat confused ; “ my father lived on the estate at one time, and that’s how I know so much about the family.”

“ What do people think became of the man that disappeared ? ” asked Mr. Winnersley.

“ I don’t know what they think, sir ; perhaps he has thrown himself into some rushing river and been carried out to sea, or perhaps he has been killed in some drunken brawl. He will never be found again alive ; if he was found people would hunt him, and shout at him, and stone him as they do a mad dog. And it is bad enough for the dog when he is mad, but when it is a poor dog that has lost his way, and looks up with beseeching eyes at every passer-by, asking for his master :—and first one picks up a stone and throws it, and then another does the same, and then another, until at last the dog lies by the roadside bruised and gasping his faithful life away :—and some one, more merciful than

the rest, fetches a gun from a house near by, or casts him into the nearest pond:—then it is bad. But the dog should have stuck to his master, shouldn't he, sir?"

"Certainly he ought," said Mr. Winnersley, who was quite mystified both by the sweep's manner and by his words, which he had spoken in his usual melancholy way, more as if he was speaking to himself than to another person, and which manner he had suddenly abandoned to utter the last sentence.

"So it is," continued Pilgrimson; "if once we abandon right we are open to every attack, and we must be destroyed at last." And then he lapsed into silence.

"I asked you about Roseworth because, as I dare say you know, Loyton has taken his wife there," said the curate, who felt that he ought to give some reason for asking a question that had evidently stirred up melancholy memories.

"Yes, sir, I had heard about it," answered the sweep, "but I can't tell you any more about the de Careys."

And then Winnersley and the sweep each went on their way.

The curate told his wife what he had heard

from the sweep. "I can't make much of him, though," he continued; "he is so melancholy in his manner, and so generally mysterious, that it is hardly possible to tell what he really does mean. But to-day he not only intimated that he had had a father, but also said that he used to live on the Roseworth estate, and I don't think he had ever mentioned either of these facts before."

"And what he has said is not very much," said Emily, laughing, "seeing that Roseworth estate contains many thousand acres, and not a few villages, besides a great part of the town of Bellesbury."

"No, it is nothing very definite," answered Mr. Winnersley, "but I don't think he would have said even that if he could have helped it."

The curate and his wife were very happy in their little cottage home. It was situated on some gently rising ground at the foot of the Warnton Hills, and from its windows could be seen a lovely view of fields and pastures, spread out like a map before them, and bounded by distant mountains. Here and there, close by, curled up the blue smoke of the labourer's cottage, while more distant, a misty cloud betokened the

situation of some manufacturing town. Nearer at home the landscape was embroidered with the well-timbered hedgerows of the Warnton estate, and two or three fields away in front of the house, at the bottom of the hill, ran the Chancebridge high-road. It was a fair scene to have always before one's eyes, and many times did the young couple congratulate themselves that their lot was cast in so pleasant a place.

Alicia Loyton made up her mind to bear with her husband, but she could not help feeling her changed position. Still she considered the thorns of very little account in comparison with the glorious rose she was to pluck; and as time went on, the flower seemed to become more certainly within her reach. She had carefully studied a pedigree of her husband, which she had received from Mr. Sleight, and by means of this, and by frequent questionings of Loyton himself, she had learned exactly how she was situated. And she was well satisfied; but her oft-repeated queries told Loyton how much the Warnton estate was bound up in her thoughts, and at last he even came to think that she cared more for the estate than for himself.

“ You care more for the estate than you do for

me," said Loyton, pettishly, to his wife, one day after she had been questioning him.

"What nonsense you talk, James," answered she; "at all events you will be the means of our getting the estate, and surely what procures the thing is as valuable as the thing itself."

"I don't quite see your argument, Alicia," said he; "and besides, I don't ever expect to get the estate."

"Well, James, I will do the expecting for you and myself too; I am quite capable."

Alicia was very careful never in the slightest degree to quarrel with her husband; she did not wish to lay the foundations of a difference now which might be inconvenient to her, and difficult to overcome in the future. And it would have been very easy for her to quarrel with him; his manner, necessarily not so refined as hers, jarred upon her at every turn, and his modes of thought and expression, somewhat vulgar as they were, were a constant annoyance to her. So, mindful of the position which she hoped her husband would some day fill, Alicia tried insensibly to educate him for it, and raise him to a higher tone of thinking and speaking, the latter, perhaps, being more important in her eyes than the former.

Loyton's situation at Roseworth was very different from his former one at Warnton Vicarage ; but he had learned much more when he was with Mr. Lastey, the Chancebridge nurseryman, than he had required to put in practice at Mr. Perry's, and after a short time he was quite able to manage the comparatively large grounds at Roseworth, and his superior appearance gave him that command over the men that were under him that many people would only acquire by age. He had now come to really love his wife, for he was not at bottom a bad man, and had acted thoughtlessly rather than deliberately in marrying Alicia, though he was not entirely blind to the advantages of securing a lady so much above him, when she so directly threw herself at him. And loving his wife as he did, he wanted her to care more about him and his doings than she did about his possible future. He would try to interest her in his garden and greenhouses, in which he himself took great pride.

"I have not seen the grounds looking so well for a long time as they do now," said he to Alicia.

"Do they?" asked Alicia, without any other sign of interest; and then she added, "I hope

you'll do something better some day than keep these grounds in order."

"I never want a better situation than this, Alicia."

"Some day you won't want any situation."

"When will that be, Alicia?"

"When you get Warnton."

"Bother Warnton! I do wish you would leave off thinking of the place," said Loyton hastily. "I'm not always thinking of it, and what I am doing I like to do well; while I am a gardener, I will be a gardener, and let the future take care of itself."

"I hope the future will take care of us as well as of itself," said Alicia, as pleasantly as she could, for true to her purpose, she would not dispute with her husband.

"Well, let us wait till it comes, Alicia," said he, somewhat mollified by her manner; "not bothering about it won't prevent its coming, if it is to come."

Alicia, however, did not quite fall in with her husband's ideas, though she said no more at that time. But it still occupied her thoughts, and prevented her even attempting to settle down at Roseworth.

Not long after she had gone to Roseworth with her husband, her father came over to see her, much to his wife's disgust; but Parson Ned could not let his daughter go to her new home without knowing where and what it was. Alicia put on her most contented manner, and of course did not tell her father what was nearest her heart, but she made a point of learning as well as she could the present state of the old Squire's health. Her father did not attempt to lecture her on her past behaviour; he accepted the situation and made the best of it, knowing enough of his daughter's character to feel very sure that what she took into her head to do, she would carry out, whoever might be the people who objected; and besides, it was no use making any comment upon an accomplished fact. Loyton showed him round the grounds, and seemed to ignore the fact that he was now his son-in-law; and his modest and unassuming manner pleased the parson so much that he even began to like the young man, and think that matters were not quite so bad as they might have been. So Mr. Perry went back to Warnton well pleased with his visit; for he had seen the position that his daughter was in, and had found Loy-

ton much nicer in every respect than he had expected.

Mrs. Perry, however, would listen to nothing about Roseworth, and I am not sure if she did not even think Sir Lionel himself was a kind of partner in her daughter's misdemeanour, since he had taken her husband into his employ. And besides, she had Nellie's affairs on her mind. Mr. Selton's visits to the Vicarage had lately increased in frequency, and at last he had had a private interview with the parson, asking to be received as Ellen's suitor, adding that he had reason to believe that the lady herself would not object. Now Mr. Perry had long since become very fond of Mr. Selton, and had watched the growing affection between his daughter and him with great satisfaction—a satisfaction about half shared by his wife. So he gave him the permission sought for at once, without consulting Mrs. Perry, who, when she heard of it, was very angry at not having been consulted, although she herself well knew, and her husband also well knew, that it would have made no difference, except to delay the permission for a few minutes. But it was a grievance against her husband, and for some days he was obliged to put up with his wife's

comments upon the circumstance, which were decidedly uncomplimentary to himself, and reflected much upon his want of common sense, which all his wife's endeavours had, in her opinion, failed to instil into him.





CHAPTER XX.

AFTER THE SQUIRE DIED.

TIME went on, and autumn came again, carpeting the Warnton lanes with withered leaves ; and in October the event occurred which Warnton Kings had so long expected that it came most unexpectedly, namely, the death of the Squire, Ralph Warnton, who one morning was found dead in his bed. His sudden death roused at once all the former gossip and speculation caused by the untimely death of his son, and now with increased vigour. But the excitement did not culminate until the last of the Warntons had been carried to his last home in the chancel of Warnton church, and the family solicitor had announced that he had died intes-

tate, and that the estate must necessarily descend to the heir-at-law, if one could be found. Loyton's name was in every mouth, and the villagers had so far settled the affair among themselves that they began to wonder when he would come to take possession, with what kind of greeting they should meet him, and what kind of festivities he would give to celebrate his accession to the estate. Opinion in the parish among the lower orders was favourable to him, as it was likely to be when one of themselves was gaining a step in life, even though the step were a very high one and somewhat unexpected.

"He'll make a good squire," said Cross to John Pilgrimson, one day after the funeral.

"Perhaps he will," said the sweep; "but it is very uncertain how people will turn out."

"He's good-looking enough, that's one thing," said Cross, "and it's much better to have a good-looking squire than a bad-looking one."

"There's many as good-looking as he is and they may be better men."

"Well, John, he ought not to have done as he did about Miss Perry," said Thomas Cross, who during the last week had quite lost his former indignation against Loyton, seeing that he was

to be the Squire, but who still thought it well to appear somewhat regretful ; “ but it has turned out well, hasn’t it ? ”

“ We shall see, we shall see,” said the sweep, shaking his head, and speaking very doubtfully, as if he were not quite satisfied.

“ Why, what is there doubtful or melancholy in it, John ? ”

“ We shall see,” repeated the sweep, walking slowly away.

“ Come and have a glass of beer at Dorman’s, and cheer up,” said Cross to him.

“ Not to-day, thank you, Cross,” said the sweep as he continued on his way.

Cross was much surprised at the sweep’s behaviour, though his whole manner lately had been very peculiar ; but the sweep was a privileged person, who was allowed to act in any way he liked without much comment, and Cross soon forgot that there was anything strange about him.

Mr. Jeremiah Sleight, as soon as Ralph Warnton’s funeral was over, sent a copy of Loyton’s pedigree with the proofs thereof to the family solicitor, Mr. John Charles Snowden, of the firm of Snowden, King, and Snowden, of

Lincoln's Inn Fields, and claimed the possession of the property for his client. He received a letter back acknowledging its receipt, and saying that it should be duly considered, but that time was required for its verification. Sleight forthwith wrote to Loyton, detailing his proceedings and recommending him to stay at Roseworth Park for the present.

James Loyton did not yet quite understand his wife : he expected her to be overjoyed at the prospect of the fulfilment of her hopes ; but it was not so. She accepted the news in a quietly triumphant manner, without any outburst of rejoicing. Loyton himself did not think that he was any nearer the possession of the estate, and was well content to accept Sleight's advice and remain where he was, since he did not expect to have any occasion to leave. His wife, however, thought differently.

"Now we shall soon leave Roseworth," said she, after she had read Mr. Sleight's letter.

"I don't see that the Squire's death brings us any nearer the property," said Loyton.

"But it brings the property nearer us, which is much the same thing ; you ought to think so too ; you don't deserve your good luck."

"Since you know all about it, Alicia, perhaps you will tell me what you propose to do," said Loyton, rather pettishly, since he did not like his wife's constant allusions to the estate.

"I haven't quite made up my mind yet, but I think of going to my aunt Duggard's until we go to Warnton. It will be much better to go to our property from the house of a relation than from a menial situation like this."

"I think Mr. Sleight's advice very good," objected Loyton, "and if we follow it we shall not look so foolish if there is any mistake."

"There can be no mistake, James, I am sure of that; but perhaps your plan is best."

After a little while Alicia announced her intention of staying at Roseworth; she had come to think that it would be giving the matter too great importance to make any change in her mode of life, for she did not want to show how great her satisfaction was at the present state of affairs. She knew her mother well enough to be certain that she would welcome her most eagerly at Warnton Vicarage if she really were going to be mistress of the Court, in spite of her present anger; but she was not so certain of a reconciliation if her claim was not absolutely

made out. So she thought it well to pave the way for a visit to Closingham, if she should come in time to think it the best thing to do. So she wrote a letter to her aunt giving her an account of what had happened, and pretending herself to think very little of it; but there was nevertheless a triumphant tone about the letter which gave Mrs. Duggard a deeper insight into her niece's hopes, than the mere words afforded. And Mrs. Duggard, so ready to sympathize with others, could not help triumphing with her niece.

"Here is good news," said she excitedly, handing the letter to her husband, and standing close by him as he read it.

"There's many a slip between cup and lip," was the only comment Mr. Duggard made upon it as he gave her back the letter.

"I should like her to come here if she wishes to," suggested Mrs. Duggard, her ardour rather damped, as it often was, by her husband's unsentimental remark.

"So that she does not bring her husband with her, I don't mind," answered Mr. Duggard; "I won't have him idling about the house."

"You'll have him when he's Squire of Warn-ton though, Thomas," questioned Mrs. Duggard.

"No, I shan't, for I don't expect he will want to come, and I am sure his wife won't."

Mrs. Duggard sighed a little sigh of regret that her husband should think so badly of anybody, especially of her niece, as to suppose that such ingratitude was possible, and did not attempt to continue the conversation. So she relieved her feelings by writing a very kind and affectionate letter to Alicia, which that lady read with satisfaction, and forthwith put into her pocket, congratulating herself that things seemed to be turning out very much as she could wish.

Mr. Jeremiah Sleight now thought it safe to tell Parson Perry of the fortune his daughter was coming into. Mr. Perry was engaged in writing a sermon in his study for the Sunday after the Squire's funeral, and was trying his best to be very impressive upon the subject of his death, when Mr. Sleight was announced.

"Good morning, Mr. Perry, I hope you are well," said he, crossing over to the parson and holding out his hand. "You are busy, I see, pray excuse the interruption," continued he with a smile.

"Never mind, Mr. Sleight; my occupation is

not very urgent," answered Mr. Perry. "Pray take a seat."

Mr. Sleight carefully placed his hat upon a side table, pulled a chair a few inches towards the fire, and crossed his hands over his knee.

"Fortune is a fickle dame, my dear sir, a fickle dame," began Mr. Sleight after a short pause, during which he had been gently swaying himself backwards and forwards.

Mr. Perry had imagined, when he heard Mr. Sleight's name announced, that his business was connected with Warnton Court, and the sentence he had just uttered confirmed him in his suspicion; but knowing that Sleight was interested in Loyton, he was not certain whether dame Fortune had been favourable or unfavourable to his late gardener, and so he gave a general assent to the other's proposition.

"She lifts up the humble and abases the proud," continued Mr. Sleight sententiously, still swaying himself slowly in his chair.

"She does indeed," said the parson, adding cautiously, "sometimes," perhaps remembering that Fortune not unfrequently gives more to him who already hath.

"I may say, my dear sir, that I have discovered

the heir-at-law to the Warnton estate," said Mr. Sleight slowly.

"Indeed, Mr. Sleight," said the vicar, outwardly calm, but getting somewhat more interested, though he hardly expected that Loyton was the heir-at-law in question.

"I could not help coming to you myself, knowing you would be so much interested."

"I am very much obliged to you ; of course from my position I am interested in all parish affairs."

"But my news, my dear sir, is interesting to you on another account. Let me congratulate you, Mr. Perry, heartily," and he jumped up and seized Mr. Perry by the hand.

"I don't quite understand you, Mr. Sleight," said Mr. Perry, yielding himself somewhat reluctantly to the lawyer's congratulations.

"The next heir is James Loyton, the husband of your daughter."

Mr. Perry looked at the lawyer steadily. "But is there not some flaw in the pedigree? I have always understood so," said he.

"There certainly is some doubt about one little fact," said Mr. Sleight, though he spoke by no means doubtfully.

"Don't you think some one will take advantage of it?"

"No, sir, I don't think so, or I should not be here now," said Mr. Sleight, somewhat vehemently; "no, my dear sir, no one could take advantage of it, not even an angel from heaven. I beg pardon, Mr. Perry," added he, seeing that the parson looked rather shocked at his vehemence.

"Why are you so certain, Mr. Sleight?"

"It is so extremely improbable that it is nearly, if not quite, impossible."

The parson considered a little, but his thoughts took no definite shape. "What steps have you taken?" he went on to say.

"I have sent in the claim to Mr. Snowden, and am every day expecting a letter from him to say that he allows it."

"And if he does allow the claim?"

"Why then, sir, Loyton may walk in, simply walk in," said Mr. Sleight, rubbing his hands together energetically with his smile pervading more of his face than usual.

"Then if some one else claims the estate afterwards?"

"At least, my dear sir, your son-in-law would be in possession. But I don't fear that."

The parson pondered over the communication he had just received from Sleight in silence. Although he had so readily forgiven his daughter, still her behaviour had caused him deep pain, and the fact that now her position was likely to be much changed, did not in his mind at all banish the remembrance of her deceit. Of course he could not be sorry that his daughter's position would be better than could have been expected, but still he was not pleased, for he could not help regarding it as in some way the reward of ill-doing. However, he put off its further consideration, and after a short pause, as if he thought all that need be had been said on the subject of Sleight's visit, he asked his visitor to take some refreshment.

"You will have a glass of sherry and a biscuit after your walk, Mr. Sleight?" said he, getting up to ring the bell.

"Thank you, my dear sir; I will with pleasure."

So wine and biscuits came, and whilst they were being discussed the conversation turned upon the state of the weather, and how early winter had set in, and the usual things that are used to fill up the corners of a more important

conference. When Mr. Sleight rose up to go away, Mr. Perry himself went to open the front door for him, and as he went out the lawyer said,—

“ I will let you know what Mr. Snowden says, Mr. Perry, as soon as I know myself; good bye, my dear sir,” and with that he walked off down the drive.

The parson shut the door, and walked back thoughtfully to his study, but before he reached his room Mrs. Perry caught him up. Mrs. Perry's temper had by no means improved lately, in fact, she seemed to have got sharper, and more captious at anything her husband did without consulting her; and even if he did consult her he was not by any means sure of getting off without a scolding. Mr. Perry noticed her changed behaviour, but uncomplainingly bore all her temper, for he knew how much she had had to try her lately.

“ What does that man Sleight want ?” said she very sharply to her husband.

“ He came about affairs concerning the Court, my dear,” answered the parson meekly; for he knew that the mention of Loyton's name would cause a storm, and he intended to keep the real

object of Sleight's visit in the background if he could; and fortune seemed to favour him, for instead of requiring further particulars about his business, Mrs. Perry said,—

“What has he got to do with the Court, I should like to know?—interfering in business that doesn't at all need his attention. I shouldn't encourage him, if I were you.”

“I don't encourage him, my dear,” responded the parson, “but I could not shut the door in his face.”

But Mrs. Perry was too angry to stay to listen to any more of her husband's defence, and turned away as quickly as she had come, muttering something about “common sense,” the want of which was so favourite an accusation of hers against her husband.

The parson went on towards his own room, glad enough to get off the task of further explanation at the cost of a scolding, and sitting down in his arm-chair began to think over all that Mr. Sleight had told him, and what its consequences would be.

Some few days after Mr. Jeremiah Sleight's visit to Warnton the looked-for letter from Mr. Snowden arrived, in which that gentleman

stated that he had thoroughly gone into the pedigree that he had received from Mr. Sleight, and had proved it by reference to parish registers, and by other means, and was perfectly satisfied that it was correct; but at the same time he should be glad if Mr. Sleight would agree that some little time should elapse before his client took possession of the property, for the purpose of advertising and making inquiries for the descendants of Richard Coyner and Dorothy Warnton, if there were any. He thought it would be much better to do so before Mr. Loyton (so he called him) formally took possession, as it might save annoyance afterwards.

Mr. Sleight could not help seeing the matter in the same light, and wrote to Mr. Snowden saying, in the name of his client, that he thought the course proposed was in every way the best course to take, and naming a period of six months during which every enquiry should be made; at the same time he told Mr. Snowden that he himself had made a diligent search for Dorothy's descendants, but had failed to find any.

Mrs. Loyton heard of the six months' probation with indifference; she felt sure now of her object, and whether she attained it six months sooner

or later was of very little account in her estimation. Loyton was now obliged to think that what his wife had been continually dinning into his ears was true, and he was well pleased with his good fortune. He felt that he was coming into the property in a straightforward manner, deceiving nobody, and defrauding nobody, and he made up his mind to accept his situation with all thankfulness, and try to do his duty in his new circumstances. And having once made up his mind that it was really coming to pass, he entered into his wife's plannings and arrangings with spirit enough to please even Alicia.

It soon got abroad that Loyton was coming to Warnton Court in six months, and the great topic of conversation in Warnton Kings at the present time was how he would bear himself in his new position of squire of the parish.





CHAPTER XXI.

WHAT FOLLOWED WHEN MRS. PERRY HEARD THE NEWS.



R. PERRY never liked undertaking anything that promised to be unpleasant to himself, and informing his wife of the contents of Mr. Sleight's letter seemed likely to be unpleasant in the highest degree; and yet he knew that he ought to do so, and made up his mind to that effect, but at the same time without deciding when, and so the dreaded moment was put off.

It was not long before Mrs. Larchpole heard of the talk of the village. The gardener had heard it as he came to his work, and had told the cook, the cook had informed the house-

maid, who in her turn had told Mrs. Larchpole's maid, and she told her mistress as she was attending to her wants on a certain Saturday night, when it was too late to rush to Mrs. Perry and congratulate her as she would have wished to have done. So she was obliged to restrain herself during service on Sunday morning, confining herself to sundry glances, and smiles, and suppressed nods directed at her friend, somewhat to the surprise of Mrs. Perry, who was quite ignorant of any reason why she should be nodded at from a seat separated from hers by nearly the whole width of the church; but when the congregation had left, and Mr. Perry had taken off his surplice, and had joined his wife in the body of the church, Mrs. Larchpole came up to her, and at once took her aside and began to congratulate her.

"Oh, Lizzie dear," she exclaimed enthusiastically, "do let me congratulate you."

Mrs. Perry, entirely ignorant why congratulations should be poured forth upon her, least of all congratulations so urgent that they could not be restrained until she was outside the church, seemed rather astonished, and said, "Why, what do you mean, Kate?"

"Nay, Lizzie, don't pretend you do not know; it is as good as a fairy tale—Beauty and the Beast, for instance."

"I don't in the least know what you mean, Kate; please be more definite in your congratulations, if I am to have any."

"Why, Lizzie, it is the talk of the whole parish. I am so glad."

"What does Kate mean?" asked Mrs. Perry, turning to her husband, who had been talking to Mr. Larchpole, awaiting the time when it should be the ladies' pleasure to leave the church; "do you know?"

An expression of confusion was visible on Mr. Perry's face when his wife turned to him, for he had heard the enthusiastic greeting Mrs. Larchpole had given her dear friend. He was puzzled to know what to say, for he could not say he did not know, and so he laid the burden on the broad shoulders of the parish.

"People are talking about the Court, Elizabeth, my dear," said he mildly, "and perhaps Mrs. Larchpole refers to that."

"Oh, that is what you mean, Kate? So our new Squire is a matter of congratulation to us, is he?"

"Yes, indeed; don't you know who he is?"

"No; how should I?"

"The new Squire is your son-in-law, Loyton."

Mrs. Perry could not have been more surprised if she had been told that her husband was going to be Archbishop of Canterbury, although she thought that common sense was often the last thing considered requisite for such high positions.

"That is a very old joke, Kate. I am surprised at your mentioning it, for you know how deeply that man has injured me," said she somewhat angrily.

"But it is true, Lizzie dear; indeed it is—is it not, Mr. Perry?" said she, appealing to the parson.

"So everybody says," answered he, using as few words as possible.

"Edward, I think you have been very wrong not to tell me of these rumours before, that I might contradict them at once," said his wife.

"I did not know what to do," said he meekly.

"You never do," answered Mrs. Perry sharply.

Seeing that Mrs. Perry was fast losing her

temper, Mrs. Larchpole proposed that they should go to the Vicarage, as things could be talked over there far more decently than in the church, so they adjourned to Mrs. Perry's drawing-room. It was no unusual thing for Mr. and Mrs. Larchpole to go there after church and take luncheon, for The Lawns was some distance away from the church, and if they went home to lunch they had to hurry very much to be in time for service again at three.

"Now let me hear what it is that people say," said Mrs. Perry, after they were all comfortably seated.

"My dear Elizabeth," began the parson, "it appears that Mr. Sleight—"

"If there is a man worse than Loyton in the world, it is Sleight," interrupted Mrs. Perry, angrily, with an indignant movement.

"My dear, listen to what I have to say," said Mr. Perry, with for him a decided air of authority. "Sleight has claimed the Warnton estate for Loyton, and his claim has been allowed by the London solicitors."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Mrs. Perry, leaning forward in her chair, and gazing eagerly at her husband.

"What I say, my dear," answered the parson, relapsing into his usual meek manner.

"There, I told you so, Lizzie," exclaimed Mrs. Larchpole, "now you must indeed let me congratulate you."

Mrs. Perry for once disregarded the voice of her friend, and she addressed herself to her husband.

"How long have you known this, Edward?"

"Only two or three days."

"Then you have known it two or three days longer than you ought to have done without telling me; but it is what I might have expected from you. I don't believe it."

"Why don't you believe it, Lizzie?" asked Mrs. Larchpole.

"Don't you know what a bad character that Sleight is?" asked Mrs. Perry, turning to her; "spreading these reports is some trick of his for making money."

"But the London lawyer, Lizzie," suggested Mrs. Larchpole; "what is his name?" she continued, turning to the parson.

"Mr. Snowden," he replied.

"Well, Mr. Snowden would not recognize the claim if it were not correct, for those London

lawyers are always so particular. A dear friend of mine once had some legal difficulty that her country solicitor could make nothing of; but a London lawyer put it right directly."

Mrs. Larchpole was very wishful that the story might turn out to be correct, not only because she was very fond of such romantic occurrences, another of which it would add to her apparently inexhaustible store, but also because she thought it would be a great pleasure to her dear friend Mrs. Perry, and so she did her best to convince Mrs. Perry of its truth.

"I should think Mr. Snowden would not let Mr. Sleight lead him into countenancing an untruth," said Mrs. Perry doubtfully, and beginning to moderate her anger.

"Of course he would not," observed Mrs. Larchpole. "Don't you think so, Mr. Perry?"

"The news came upon me so suddenly that I hardly knew what to think," answered the parson.

"Then you should have asked me," broke in Mrs. Perry.

"I should have done so soon, for Loyton takes possession in six months."

"What! Possession! Six months! Has

it come to that?" exclaimed Mrs. Perry, now fairly astonished.

"So Mr. Sleight says."

"Then you may indeed congratulate me," said she excitedly, jumping up off her chair, and rushing over to Mrs. Larchpole; "fancy Alicia owner of the Warnton estate."

"That is, her husband, Lizzie," said Mrs. Larchpole, shaking her hand most heartily, and kissing her enthusiastically.

"That's quite the same thing, Kate," responded Mrs. Perry.

After Mrs. Perry's first excitement had subsided, and she had again retreated to her chair, she said,—

"I wonder how Mr. Sleight found it out."

"I should think he had worked up the claim, and had known it for some time," said Mr. Perry.

"What a clever man he must be," observed Mrs. Larchpole.

"I think he is," quietly observed the parson.

"He must be a clever man indeed," exclaimed Mrs. Perry, "I declare I quite like him."

"I thought you would," said Mr. Perry drily.

At this moment the parlour-maid opened the door, and announced luncheon.

"Come, Elizabeth, my dear, luncheon is ready," said the parson, rising from his seat, and feeling only too thankful that the storm he had dreaded was over. And they went into the dining-room.

Of course, not much besides the new Squire was talked of at luncheon, but by the end of that meal, Mrs. Perry was as firmly convinced of Loyton's advancement as she had before held it to be impossible, though she had not yet begun to consider what her conduct towards her daughter should be. And as she went into church, she walked along the aisle to her pew, fully convinced that now at least every eye must be turned to her as the mother-in-law of the future Squire, a dignified position indeed, but she forgot that although some squires are mighty potentates in their way, still people are more generally concerned with their own affairs than with the looks of such mighty potentates' mothers-in-law, especially as the fact was not a new one to them, however much it might be so to Mrs. Perry. The consequence was that her new-born dignity went unnoticed.

Nellie Perry was truly pleased to hear of the good fortune awaiting her sister, chiefly because

it would bring her to live near to her. In spite of all her sister's misbehaviour with Loyton, and frequent crossness with and neglect of herself, she loved her dearly and was very glad. She had begun to think of her own marriage, which was to take place in the early summer, and rejoiced that her future home would be in Chancebridge, within easy visiting distance of Warnton Court. She was altogether too simple and straightforward to imagine, nor had she looked deep enough into her sister's heart to suspect, that Mrs. Loyton of Warnton Court would not improbably very much look down upon and despise a mere country doctor and his wife, even though that wife should be her sister, and her own husband a whilom gardener.

Mrs. Perry was in very good spirits all the afternoon, but nothing more on the subject so near her heart was said until after dinner, when the parson had left the table, and had seated himself in an easy chair by the side of the fire, with a little table beside him on which stood wine and biscuits, the usual way in which he took dessert when they were alone. His wife sat opposite to him, with the "Guardian" on her knee, but instead of reading it, she was gazing

into the fire. Nellie was still at the table. Mr. Perry began the conversation.

"What do you intend to do about Alicia, Elizabeth?" he asked.

"That is what I am thinking about now," answered she; "she must come and stay with us."

"But you said you would never speak to her again," suggested Mr. Perry.

"Things are so altered now. If she is to be the Squire's wife, and the chief lady in the parish, I think the clergyman's wife should be on good terms with her if she can."

"Of course," acquiesced the parson.

"So that although she has so deeply hurt and grieved me, my duty as your wife commands me to forgive her, though as her mother I can never forget her conduct," continued Mrs. Perry.

"I suppose practically it will come to the same thing; you will receive her as if nothing had happened," said Mr. Perry.

"Of course," said his wife.

"I suppose you will write and ask her to come here?"

"Yes, I shall write to-morrow."

And so the subject dropped.

Mrs. Loyton was not surprised when she re-

ceived her mother's letter, which contained most loving expressions of attachment to her dear daughter, who she hoped would forget her apparently harsh behaviour. She told Alicia that she must bring her husband, and stay at the Vicarage until the business was settled, adding that as there was such a bright future in store for her, they must both forget the uncomfortable past.

Alicia announced her intention of accepting her mother's invitation, to which Loyton could not demur, although he felt somewhat uncomfortable at the thought of revisiting as a gentleman the place he had left as a servant, feeling that to act the gentleman was a part he was not unlikely to fail in, as he was painfully aware that change of position alone did not qualify him to do so. These doubts he communicated to his wife, who laughed at them, well knowing how many faults the possession of money covers, and who was not gifted with a fine enough nature to enter into his difficulties, and cared only for the position and not for the proper fulfilment of it when it was once obtained. She therefore wrote back to her mother, saying that she should be delighted to return home in a fortnight with her husband, and quietly abstaining from any reference to the past.

Sir Lionel de Carey, who had gone abroad for the winter, of course heard of the good fortune that had befallen his head gardener, and wrote him a letter full of hearty congratulations, taking for granted that he would leave his situation at once, and jokingly adding that he on his part much regretted the loss of one whose services had so much pleased him, and that if he managed an estate as well as he managed a garden, he would make a very successful squire.

Now that Alicia had determined to go back to Warnton, her thoughts turned to a subject which has great attraction for many female minds, namely, her wardrobe. The lack of opportunity for procuring a proper trousseau that her elopement had caused was its chief drawback in her eyes. Now what is a proper trousseau? A large collection of things without which very few young ladies would think of being married, sufficient to last years upon years, and bought, I verily believe, only to satisfy that innate love of shops that is so frequently planted in the female breast. For does not fashion quickly change, and leave far behind in the race only a last year's bonnet or dress, not to mention those articles when two or three years old? Yet bonnets and dresses

are provided in plenty ; and so with other things ; they frequently turn out perfectly useless. " Oh," says Mrs. Mother-in-law, " the trousseau is not a man's business at all." Nay, my dear madam, pardon ; unless men brought reason to bear on such things, women for the most part have none to bring ! But Mrs. Mother-in-law would never be convinced, even if all the satirical pens in England were pointed at her, for is she not supported and encouraged by that powerful personage, Mrs. Grundy ?

Alicia, therefore, now thought she must do what she had been unable to do before, and procure an outfit suitable to her future needs, and to do this she required money.

" James, I can't go to Warnton with no more clothes than I am wearing, nor can you either, for the matter of that," said she to her husband.

" No, I suppose we ought to have some better things, Alicia," said he.

" Well, I propose that you write to Mr. Sleight to advance us some money to get things with."

" Will he send us some ?"

" Of course he will ; there is no doubt of that."

"How much shall I ask for, Alicia? I have no idea how much things cost."

"When we are asking we may as well ask for enough. Say five hundred pounds."

"Five hundred pounds! That seems a great deal: I had no idea of borrowing so much."

"We must be dressed according to our station, and have things nice about us. Everybody would remark it if we did not," said Alicia.

"You know best, I suppose," acquiesced Loyton; "then I will send for five hundred pounds."

So Loyton wrote a letter to Mr. Sleight asking him for the money, and instead of writing, Mr. Jeremiah Sleight came over to Roseworth Park himself. He brought the money in his pocket, but required Loyton to sign a note of hand for it before he handed it over to him. At the same time he told Loyton that he had his written agreement to pay him the capital sum of one thousand pounds, and appoint him agent to the Warnton estate, if through his instrumentality he obtained possession of it. Loyton had forgotten the agreement, and told Alicia so after the lawyer had departed.

"But I think he deserves it for his trouble," said he.

"He's too clever for me," answered Alicia ;
"he evidently takes care of himself very well ;
I don't much like him."

"I don't see that there is much need to like
him, but I certainly am grateful to him," observed
Loyton.

"He would not serve us unless by so doing
he served himself, you may be sure," said Alicia,
"so there is no need for gratitude."

After receiving the money Alicia proposed
that they should spend a week in London, for
she said she was certain that things fit for her
to wear could be procured nowhere else. So in a
week's time they left Roseworth and went to
London, where Loyton had never been before.
But Alicia knew town well, and took him from
shop to shop, and from amusement to amuse-
ment, until he was fairly bewildered, and in his
heart sighed sometimes for the gardener's cottage
by the stream at Roseworth. Alicia bargained
and bought to her heart's content, until at last
she was quite satisfied, announced her readiness
to return to Warnton Kings, and wrote to her
mother fixing a day for her arrival.

It was a bright day in the last week of No-
vember on which Alicia and her husband returned.

There had been a sharp frost in the morning, and it had developed into one of those glorious autumn days which come like ghosts of summer days gone by, a day on which the few remaining frost-blackened geraniums and drooping chrysanthemums strive to persuade themselves that the bad times are past, and summer time is coming once again, so bright look they.

Mr. Perry had sent a car to meet Mr. and Mrs. Loyton at the station, as he had no carriage that would carry their luggage as well as themselves, and now it was coming up the drive to the Vicarage. Mr. and Mrs. Perry and Nellie were standing at the door as they drove up.

"My dearest daughter!" exclaimed Mrs. Perry, throwing her arms round Alicia's neck the instant she stepped out of the carriage, to the great peril of some of her new London finery, and kissing her enthusiastically.

"My own dear mother!" responded Alicia, yielding herself passively to her mother's demonstrations.

Mr. Perry kissed his daughter warmly when his wife had relaxed her embraces, and Nellie, with her face glowing with love and delight, welcomed her sister back to Warnton.

"How well you look, dear," said Mrs. Perry, casting an approving glance over the before-mentioned efforts of a London milliner and dressmaker.

Then there came a pause, which might have become awkward if Mrs. Perry had not insisted upon accompanying her daughter forthwith to her room.

Loyton, meanwhile, after the first hand-shakings and greetings, had busied himself in superintending the removal of the luggage from the car, hoping thereby to cover a certain embarrassment which he not unnaturally felt.

"Come, never mind those boxes, Loyton," said the parson kindly, seeing his confusion, "the servants will look after those things. Come with me into the drawing-room."

Loyton, recovering himself with an effort, followed the parson into the drawing-room, and after they were seated Mr. Perry endeavoured to put him at his ease by talking to him of his visit to London and what he had seen there.

James Loyton had improved wonderfully even during the short week he had been in London. The clothing of a gentleman set off his good figure and brought to light the good blood that

flowed in his veins. He had learnt much at the table d'hôte of the large and fashionable hotel where they stayed in London, at which he sat a quiet but observant spectator; and he was one who could apply the experience thus gained to himself. The whilom gardener was hardly to be discovered in the quiet and gentlemanly young man who sat in Mr. Perry's drawing-room. About his manner, too, there was a certain diffidence that added in no small degree to the interest inspired by his good looks, and altogether Mr. Perry felt to his surprise that he had no cause to be ashamed of the husband his elder daughter had chosen for herself.

Mrs. Perry was much struck by his appearance when she entered the room, for she had hardly noticed him as he got out of the carriage, so engaged was she in welcoming her daughter; but no doubt, whether improved or not, he, as Squire of Warnton, would have had equal importance in her eyes. Her first anxiety was to show him that she had entirely forgiven the past, and this she did by going up to him and welcoming him heartily, adding, however, that she intended to call him James until he had assumed the name of Warnton, which she supposed he

would do at once. "But you will like to go to your room and get rid of the dust of the journey," continued she; "let me show you where it is." So Loyton went out, and after showing him the way, Mrs. Perry returned.

"Well, I'm glad they are come, Edward," said she.

"I'm glad they look so well, Elizabeth," said her husband.

"I should think coming into a property like Warnton would make anybody on earth look well," answered Mrs. Perry.

Soon Alicia and her husband came downstairs again, and the conversation in the drawing-room became general, and everybody began to feel more at ease. Alicia behaved as if she had never left her home at all, so at home did she make herself. Questions about London and about Warnton itself were freely put and answered, but the subject of Roseworth was tacitly avoided by everyone.





CHAPTER XXII.

JOHN PILGRIMSON TALKS TO THE CURATE.



HE new Squire's appearance and manner astonished all who came in contact with him. Those of his former companions who had perhaps imagined that he would come back to them, changed only in being now the possessor of money with which he might treat them, were all disagreeably surprised. Recognise and speak to them all kindly he did, but they instinctively felt that there was more between them than the mere possession of money, and that he was not one to be taken liberties with.

This superiority of behaviour passed among some of his former companions who did not understand him as "stuck-up-ness," and one of them remarked to Cross,—

"What a fine fellow Loyton has got; far too fine to look at us."

"He was none too fond of looking at you before," answered the clerk; "wait till you have a fortune left you, and then see what you'll do. You won't be half such a good-looking fellow as he is, that's quite certain."

"Good looks don't run in your family either," said the other, nettled, as he walked away.

Joe Dorman of course was highly delighted at the turn things had taken. He was never tired of reiterating that he had always known that there was something in it. Events had so happened that he was no longer weighed down by his secret knowledge, but felt that he was free again to criticize and prophesy according to his wont without danger of divulging what he ought not. He would sit in his chair in his parlour, with his long clay pipe in his mouth, and his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat, and talk things over with whoever might happen to be there, with as much self-importance as if he had not only known all about it, but also had been mainly instrumental in placing Loyton in his present position.

Mr. and Mrs. Winnersley, as in duty bound,

called on the new Squire and his wife at the Vicarage, and were received in a very patronizing manner by Alicia. Mrs. Loyton's demeanour had become more overbearing since her return, and she could not have lorded it over her neighbours more if she had been already installed in her own drawing-room at the Court. Many of the neighbouring county families called on her and her husband, for the owner of the Warnton estate had a position in the county which could not be disregarded whoever he might happen to be. But Alicia did not impress her visitors favourably. True, her toilet was irreproachable, and her manners in a certain way those of a lady, but there was a something in her behaviour that offended the aristocratic feelings of the old families amongst whom she was thrown. The quietness and unobtrusiveness of her husband pleased people better, and no one had anything to say against him, but his wife was the subject of much adverse criticism.

Mr. and Mrs. Winnersley, on the other hand, were great favourites with their small circle of friends, and with the few neighbouring families at whose houses they visited. As a clergyman Mr. Winnersley was liked much, as a man better.

He had gained a position in the hearts of the parishioners, both high and low, that nothing could disturb. He would associate with the lowest as well as with the highest, and yet never lost his position as their clergyman.

"I wonder he likes to talk so much to such low people," said some one to an old maiden lady, who was a great admirer of his.

"Ah," answered she, "it is not the true gentleman who is afraid of associating with such people. It is he who fears that he may be taken for one of them who holds himself aloof."

Emily, too, was universally liked, amongst the poor especially. There was no one sick in the parish that she did not attend to, nor distressed whose trouble she did not enter into and alleviate to the best of her ability. Her manners were simple and unaffected, whilst her perfect sincerity of character kept her free from those make-believes and shams which women of smaller minds are too prone to indulge in. Her little cottage was a perfect example of neatness and taste, and she possessed the rare faculty of making a little, not go far, as many do, but appear much. Well educated enough to be her husband's most intimate companion and adviser,

this education enabled her to manage her small establishment with ease and comfort, instead of becoming a mere household drudge, whom the establishment, so to speak, managed. Consequently there was no drawback to their happiness.

"I am sorry I don't like Mrs. Loyton better at present," said she to her husband, "but I mean to try to."

"She never was a great favourite of mine," said her husband; "I have come to the conclusion that the female sex is divided into two classes, women and ladies; there are some women who are ladies, and there are some ladies who are women, and she is one of them."

"Nay, you are too severe," said Emily, laughing at the solemnity with which he pronounced his judgment; "pray in which class do you place me?"

"No fishing for compliments, wife," said Irwin. "You have come into no fortune to try you yet," he added jokingly.

"And I am sure I don't want one," said his wife; "I am too happy with you to want any change."

"And I am sure that whatever happened, my

wife would still be the dear woman she always was."

"Oh, then I am one of the women, am I?" asked Emily archly.

"You are my own dear wife at all events," said Irwin.

"Who is so happy that she wants nothing else," added Emily.

John Pilgrimson's behaviour grew stranger day by day. He would walk up and down the high-road through Warnton village for hours together, with downcast head, and muttering to himself all the time. His strength, too, was evidently failing, his body became more bowed, and his legs were weak and tottering, though he still plied his trade in the village.

"Poor John! he's nearly past his work," said the villagers; and with his failing health his authority amongst them failed also, and he was looked upon now with more pity than reverence, but still he was as much a mystery as ever.

"Joe," said he to Dorman one day, in a voice in which feebleness was mingled with his usual melancholy, "can you lend me a pen and ink, and a bit of paper?"

"Yes, John," said he, "but what are you going to do? Make your will?"

"No, Joe," answered the sweep, shaking his head ; " I haven't much to leave but good wishes, and they often don't count for much. I don't think I shall last much longer, and I want to write a letter."

Joe's curious ears pricked up at this, but he said no more, and fetched the things John wanted, " Where will you write ?" asked he, as the sweep took them eagerly, " in the parlour ?"

" No, thank you ; I'll go to the old shed in your yard. I'm accustomed to that, and it is my own ; people won't be likely to disturb me there as they might do here."

So John went out and across the yard, meeting as he did so Sam Cleaver, who was coming to the Warnton Arms by the back way, and who looked much astonished when he saw what it was that Pilgrimson was so carefully carrying.

" Why, John ! going to write a love-letter, eh ?" asked he.

" No, Sam, I am no more likely to do so than you are."

" I might do so, though."

" It wouldn't be answered, then," said John, a momentary gleam of merriment passing over his face as he thus replied to the smith, who then

went into the inn and called for some beer, which he discussed with the landlord.

"What's John doing with pen and ink?" asked he, after some little time.

"He's going to write a letter, so he says."

"I wonder who he's got to write to?"

"I should very much like to know if there is anything in it," said Joe.

"Suppose we go and look at him," suggested Cleaver.

"No, don't let us disturb him; he said he did not want anybody to disturb him," remonstrated Dorman.

"I'll take him a jug of beer for an excuse," said Cleaver, and so Joe's feeble remonstrances were overpowered, the beer was drawn, and the two worthies sallied forth into the yard.

The shed which Pilgrimson called his own had been a small stable, but had long been unused for that purpose, and had a door, and a window looking into the yard. To this window Joe and Sam wended their way, intending to look in and see what the sweep was doing, before they presented him with their company and the beer.

Inside the shed was all John's stock-in-trade,

in one corner was his old handcart, in another some sooty bags, and a bushel measure equally black, while his brushes were laid side by side on the floor. The sweep himself was kneeling before an old box, on the top of which he had spread his paper, and was writing with a shaking hand, which he raised every now and then, with the pen still in his fingers, to smudge away with the back of it the tears which he evidently could not check, and which had already made many a lighter channel down his sooty face. Even thick-headed Joe, and Cleaver, thoughtless as he was, when they looked through the window saw that it was not the time to interrupt him even with a jug of beer, and going back to the parlour without speaking a word, they drank the beer themselves.

John soon finished his letter, and took the ink back to Dorman.

"John has been writing a book," remarked Cleaver, who liked to poke fun at the old man, and who had not yet forgotten the sweep's opinion of the fate his love-letters were likely to meet with.

"Ah, he must have been doing so," said Dorman, following Sam's lead.

"It is to be called the life of a sweep," said Cleaver; "how interesting it will be!"

"There can't be much else in it," said Dorman.

"Not much in it!" exclaimed Pilgrimson, whom increasing infirmity perhaps made less cautious in what he said than he used to be; "not much in it! what should you say to the history of a man who had committed crimes so black, that only the blackness of a sweep could hide them? You, Joe, do you think you are the centre of the world, here in your little parlour, in your little inn? No," continued he, getting more excited as he went on, "the world is here—and here—and here," pointing wildly round, "and holds more crimes and people than you could count. No, I came here to escape the world." After a short pause he continued more calmly, "I could write the history of so bad a man, that it would nearly make you ashamed of being a man like the felon himself." And he bowed his head and went out.

They were silent a little while.

"Poor John is getting quite crazy," said Cleaver, at last.

The sweep took his letter to Irwin Winnersley, whom he found at home.

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"I want you to do me a great kindness, sir," said he to the curate.

"I'm sure I will if I can, John," answered he.

"I want you to keep this letter for me, if you please, sir," he said. "I don't think I shall last much longer, and when I am gone read it, but not before—not before."

"Why, John, what is the matter?"

"I feel that I am getting very weak and ill, and I want to tell you something before it is too late."

"You may trust me, John, I will keep your secrets," said Irwin earnestly.

"I was born a gentleman, although you might not think it," said the sweep, making an evident effort, and speaking in a low voice, "and it is my own fault that I am what I am. I have done a great wrong that I want put right when I am dead. I have not had courage to do it before. I have been a coward all my life," continued he mournfully, "and I suppose I am too old to change now."

"If I can help you with my advice I will," said Irwin.

"No, no, sir, I don't want that; I have chosen my path and I must keep it to the end, and the

end can't be far off now. But I have a spark of conscience left, and I want people to know everything when I am gone. It can't hurt me in my grave, and perhaps I may be happier then, who knows? for having done my duty even at that late hour."

"Should not you be happier, John, if you disburdened your mind now?"

"Don't ask me to, sir, please don't ask me to, for I have often felt tempted to do so lately. But I can't, sir, I can't, and it won't be long before everybody will know."

"Well, John, you know best," said Irwin, who, however anxious he had been at one time to unravel the mystery surrounding the sweep, did not care to press upon him a confidence the old man might afterwards regret; "but I should strongly advise you to do so; think about it again."

"No, sir, I have made up my mind, and I have chosen my course, and I shall keep to it to the end. But I wanted to tell you that Joe Dorman has a box of mine that contains some old books and papers. I want you to have it now, to keep it if you will, and take it after I am dead. It is all I have to leave, and you must have it. I will bring it if you will let me."

"Of course I will if you wish it, John ; but think again whether it would not make you happier if you were to set the wrong you talk of right at once."

"No, sir, my mind is made up. I have kept my secret for forty years, and I can't tell it now. Don't ask me again, but let me fetch my box."

"Very well, John," said Irwin, and the sweep went off to do so.

Joe Dorman kept the box under his bed, and had had it there so long that he had nearly forgotten its existence. And now that the sweep asked for it, Joe thought it was because he was offended at being joked about writing a book.

"I didn't mean to offend you, John," said Dorman, who had always rather liked the sweep.

"You didn't offend me, Joe. I have lived long enough in the world to know that a joke is a joke, and I don't mind being joked. I want the box to give to Mr. Winnersley, and I wrote the letter to tell him what to do with it if I should die. That is all."

It was only a little oak box, this box old John was so anxious about, and Joe carried it downstairs in his arms.

"There it is, John," said he, when he reached

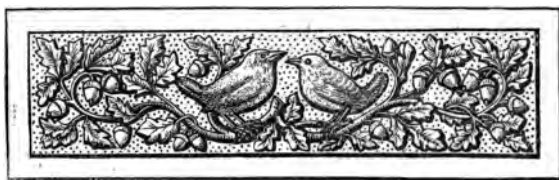
the room in which the sweep was. At one time Joe had been very anxious to know what was in the box, but he had had the keeping of it so long that his curiosity had now quite died away.

"Thank you, Joe; you've been very good to trouble about it so long. I am so much obliged to you."

"It has been no trouble at all; how could a little box like that be any trouble to me?" asked he, forcing a smile, as if to ward off a feeling of melancholy which the downcast manner of the sweep infected him with; "you're quite welcome."

John forthwith took it away to the curate's on his old hand-cart, heaping some of his sooty bags over it, that it might not be seen. Mr. Winnersley took it and promised the sweep that he would keep it most carefully for him.

Thus things went on at Warnton Kings; the days shortened, and at last Christmas came, and with it a hard frost which threatened to last some time. It was a merry Christmas at Warnton Vicarage.



CHAPTER XXIII.

THE LAST DAY OF THE OLD YEAR.

IT was the end of the old year. A deep snow covered the earth, and had blown into drifts under the hedgerows ; and on new year's eve the snow was still falling, though not continuously. From the tower of Warnton church rang out the joyous bells over the snow, over the steep hills at the back of the church, over the wide plain that lay at their feet, welcoming the coming year. It was the custom of the Warnton ringers to ring about nine o'clock on the last night of the old year, and then to go to the Warnton Arms to have supper, which was provided for them by the subscriptions of some of the Warnton inhabitants, and afterwards to go back again

to the church to ring out the old year, and ring the new year in.

So soon after nine o'clock they left the belfry and sallied out into the night to go to their supper. They trudged through the snow, their shouts and laughter ringing out as they walked along. They were a merry party, this last night of the old year, for it was their annual holiday, and they kept it with good spirit. And one of them, who was in the village choir, began to sing :—

Old Winter lives near the red north light,
His cheeks are tinged by its glow,
His home is an iceberg gleaming bright,
His hair is the falling snow.

And he sleeps all the days when the sun rules the
skies,

When the sun sinks low, he awakes ;
With a shudder and a shiver he opens his eyes,
And his frost-bitten frame he shakes.

And his hair streams out in the cold north wind,
And the form of the earth is lost ;
And the dust off his coat follows fast behind,
And falls as the white hoar-frost.

But the sun rises higher as the days roll on,
And old Winter his power must obey ;
So he sinks down to sleep his cold couch upon,
And the earth blossoms forth into May.

Just as the song was finished, a sudden ex-

clamination from one of the party caused them to stop.

"Hallo," said he, pointing to a dark mass in the snow, half covered by the drift, "what's that?"

"Let's go and see," said another, and they crossed over to it.

"It's a man."

"It's John Pilgrimson."

"What, old John? He's chosen a cold couch indeed to sleep his beer off," said one, laughing.

"He's not drunk, he's dead," said another, who had stooped over the object, and lifted one hand that lay outstretched upon the snow.

"Dead!" said they all, as a solemn hush came over them.

"Ay, dead and cold!"

And then, after a little time, these men took the old sweep up and carried him between them as best they could to Joe Dorman's.

Joe, who thought his customers were rather late, happened to go to his door, hoping to see something of them, just as they were turning the corner into the open space before the inn. He was surprised at their silence; no shouts, no laughter, as was usual, but instead a huddled

mass of men carrying some black object over the snow.

Dorman instinctively felt that something was wrong.

"What have you got there?" he cried, as soon as they came within speaking distance.

"John Pilgrimson," they shouted back.

"Why, what's the matter with him?" he asked, as they came nearer.

"He's dead," they answered, coming with their burden close to him.

They took the dead man and laid him on the floor of the out-house he had called his own, and put a sack under his head, while Dorman brought a sheet and spread it over him. Then they shut the door and left him there.

Their adventure had somewhat saddened the ringers; they were very quiet over their supper, and when they went back to ring in the belfry—for John Pilgrimson's death was not of importance enough to interfere with such an old-established custom—the bells seemed to swing mournfully, and their tone seemed to the ringers one of sadness, for old John, in spite of all his eccentricities, had been a great favourite in the parish.

Mrs. Perry and her daughter Alicia felt very contented with themselves and all the world this new year's eve. They were sitting in the drawing-room at the Vicarage talking and laying plans for Lishey's future grandeur. It had been the custom of late years for Mr. and Mrs. Perry to spend the last night of the old year at The Lawns, but this time James and his wife had objected, Loyton on account of a certain reserve and shyness, which seemed to gain increasing power over him, and his wife because forsooth she thought that in her new-born dignity she should not be too intimate with the wife of a manufacturer, even though her mother's dearest friend, and one from whom she herself had received nothing but kindness; and Mrs. Perry, on her part, did not wish to leave her dear daughter, whose influence over her mother seemed to grow day by day, to the great peril of Mrs. Perry's friendship for Mrs. Larchpole.

Mr. Perry had begun really to like his son-in-law, and he observed with dissatisfaction the growing tendency of his wife and daughter to leave him out of their plans for the future, and to regard him more as a handle to hold the estate by than a person to be consulted about it. But

the parson knew that it was no use for him to interfere. His wife had always, with exceptions so rare that they only proved the rule, taken her own course without regard to his wishes, and he was able to see that his daughter intended no one's wishes to interfere with her own. Her changed circumstances seemed only to have developed her former obstinacy and self-will.

Mr. Selton knew from Nellie that she would be at home on new year's eve. His rounds on that afternoon happening to lie in the direction of Warnton Kings, he determined to call at the Vicarage, and he ordered his horse to be put in the stable, intending to spend the evening with his lady-love. Mr. Selton was in no great favour with Mrs. Perry, and still less with Alicia, and it roused even Nellie's gentle temper to see the way her mother and sister treated him. The parson, however, was uniformly kind, and always welcomed him heartily.

The young doctor arrived at Warnton Vicarage about eight o'clock, and found everybody in the drawing-room. Mrs. Perry hardly interrupted her interesting conversation with Alicia to greet him, and Alicia's manner was extremely distant, so that very soon, after exchanging a few general

remarks with the parson, he settled himself down in a distant corner of the room to a game of chess with Nellie, more for the purpose of getting her quietly to himself, than for any interest in the game.

Mr. Selton's man put the horse in the stable, and after a long talk with the maids at the Vicarage, knowing that he would not be required by his master till late, thought it would be no bad thing to walk down to Dorman's for half-an-hour, and have a chat with the host and whoever of the neighbours might be there.

The man had been only a few minutes at Dorman's when the ringers arrived with the body of the old man ; and when they had deposited the sweep in the outhouse, Dorman asked him to go and fetch his master, as he should like a medical man to see the body as soon as possible ; so in a very short time he reached the Vicarage.

Before Mr. Selton had thought of finishing his chess with Nellie, a servant entered the room, with the self-important face of one who is the bearer of sudden or unexpected news, and announced that Mr. Selton was wanted at the Warnton Arms immediately, for the ringers had found a man dead in the snow.

This announcement at once arrested everybody's attention.

"Dear me!" said Mr. Perry, suddenly waking up from a kind of semi-doze, in which he had been indulging in his arm-chair, "what's that? A man dead in the snow! Who is it?"

The maid said that it was the old sweep, and Mr. Selton, jumping up, told her to tell his man to put his horse to, and take his gig to meet him at the Warnton Arms, as he should walk on; and after a hasty good-night to all, he started off.

"You'll have a fine kind of life, Nellie," sneered Alicia, when Mr. Selton had gone, "if you marry a doctor like he is; you'll never be certain of him for ten minutes together."

"His company will be all the more valuable when I do get it, then," said Nellie, trying to laugh off her sister's sneer.

"Fancy poor old John dying in the snow," said the parson, half to himself.

"He won't be much regretted, at any rate; he was a dreadful scamp," said Alicia, taking up her father's words.

"He has never been a scamp since I have known him, Alicia," remarked Mr. Perry, "and

no one dies, I am sure, who is not regretted by somebody."

"But he has always been so black and dirty: the roads will seem as clean again now he has not to go along them."

"Alicia," rebuked the parson mildly, "you are too hard upon the poor old man. I am sure his eccentric ways will be very much missed in the parish."

"I am going to be in the parish, and I shall not miss him, at all events," said Lishey, shrugging her shoulders. "Some persons I know do like such strange people."

The parson had no answer ready for this; in fact, he did not know whether it was intended to apply to his defence of Pilgrimson, or to Nellie's engagement to Selton; but he rather imagined the latter. He wondered, however, as he heard it, how it was possible for Alicia to have so soon forgotten that her own husband had been a person whom it was stranger to like than Selton; but the poor parson quite forgot the extreme facility many female minds have of forgetting what is disagreeable to them.

"Well, Alicia," remarked Mrs. Perry, "the old sweep's death can't make much difference to


you, so I don't think you need trouble yourself about it."

"No, indeed," observed Alicia, "it's just the same to me whether he is dead or alive, only I don't see that he is worth regretting."

Mr. Selton, of course, saw at once that John Pilgrimson was past all human aid, but he forthwith examined the body to see if there were any marks of violence upon it, and in doing so he found the key which John always carried about him, and which was tied round his neck by a piece of string.

Dorman knew that this key belonged to the little oak box the sweep had not long since taken from his custody, and not unwilling to find so good an excuse for bearing the sad news to Mr. Winnersley, set out himself at once to take him the key.

Mr. Winnersley had spent the evening in reading to his wife, an occupation they both much enjoyed; and many of the scientific writings of the day had they thus read and discussed, for Emily was as interested in such subjects as her husband was. He had no clerical horror of the advanced opinions of the present day, and thought that the value of a truth could not be



impaired by reading all that could be said against it, while frequently such a course showed more clearly the firm ground on which the truth itself rested.

Irwin was thus spending a quiet evening with his wife when the servant came in to say that Dorman was at the door, and wished to speak to Mr. Winnersley. Irwin wondered what urgent business could have brought him at such a late hour, and remarking this to his wife he got up and went to see what he was wanted for.

"John Pilgrimson has been found dead, Mr. Winnersley, and I have brought you the key of his box; he always used to carry it about with him," said he, without any pause, and apparently wishing to say all that he knew about it at once.

"John Pilgrimson found dead, Dorman? How did it happen?" exclaimed Irwin.

Nothing could have pleased Joe Dorman better than this question, and forthwith he began to tell the whole story. Mr. Winnersley interrupted him to ask him to walk in, but he declined to come further than the hall, saying that he must go back directly, and then he went on with his narration.

He was some time before he had told the tale

to his own mind, and then Mr. Winnersley went back to his wife.

"What had he to say that kept you so long?" asked she of her husband when he returned; and he, as an answer to her question, recounted the event as it had been told him by Dorman, though in fewer words.

"Poor old man," observed Emily pityingly, when he had ended; "what a sad death to die!"

"Indeed it is," said Irwin; "I shall quite miss the old man, with his patronizing manners and his moralizing speeches; I was quite fond of him."

"How little we thought when he gave you that letter that we should so soon know his mystery," said Emily.

"Yes, indeed; all his doubts and sorrows are over now," said Irwin. And neither spoke for some time.

"What shall you do about his box?" asked Emily, at last.

"By the way, I think I had better read his letter at once," said Irwin; "no doubt he says something about it in that."

"I think it will be the best thing to do," replied his wife, as he crossed over to his desk and took out the letter.

He was not without curiosity as he broke open the envelope, and sat down in a chair to read its contents. The letter was not a long one, and was written in a very trembling hand, and the curate read it in silence.

"How very strange," said he when he had finished. "I will read it to you, Emily." And he read as follows, his wife getting up and leaning over his shoulder as he did so:—

"MR. WINNERSLEY,

"When you see who writes this you will know how deeply I am degraded. Please take my box to Mr. Perry, and open it in his presence. It contains all I care about in this world, and when you know everything, forgive an old man if you can, and get your wife to forgive me too. That you may be happy, and live a happy life with your good wife in future, is the earnest prayer of the old sweep,

"FREDERICK DE CAREY."

"Frederick de Carey!" exclaimed Emily, "that is the name of the friend of my uncle James Crookenden at college, by whom he was led into so much wickedness."

"Poor man! What a punishment his life must have been to him," said Irwin.

"I wonder if it was because he thought that he had wronged our family that he took such an interest in me?"

"He certainly thought highly of your capabilities for making a good wife," said Irwin, "and he was quite right too."

"No flattery, Irwin," rebuked Emily, "and don't talk nonsense."

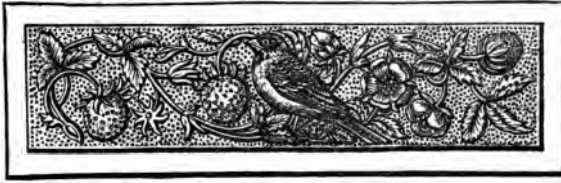
"It's quite true, nevertheless, wife. He certainly was very anxious that I should marry you. It was rather amusing, for I did all I could on my own account."

"Poor old man!"

"But the old fellow, with his queer manner, was evidently so much in earnest that it was impossible to feel offended at his apparent presumption."

"I have often wondered what his secret was, little thinking that it affected me personally," remarked Emily.

Of course it was too late to take any steps in the matter of the box that night, so the further consideration of it was put off till the morning of the new year.



CHAPTER XXIV.

WHAT THE SWEEP LEAVES BEHIND HIM.



EARLY the next morning Mr. Winersley carried the sweep's little box up to the Vicarage, and putting it down in the hall, he was ushered into the dining-room, where he found the parson and his family dawdling over a late breakfast. The parson's usual breakfast-hour of nine, since the arrival of Alicia, who did not approve of early rising, and, as she was accustomed, suited merely her own pleasure, had descended as a usual thing to half-past nine, and sometimes even to nearly ten, and consequently it was generally somewhat late before they had finished their morning meal.

"I have some strange news for you, Mr. Perry," said he, as soon as he was seated.

"What is it?" asked the parson.

"About the old sweep who was found dead last night."

Alicia, who had quite dismissed the old man from her thoughts, and was anxiously expecting news more interesting than she imagined the old man could occasion, again addressed herself to her unfinished breakfast, somewhat disgusted that he should be again brought forward.

"He gave me a letter some time ago," resumed Mr. Winnersley, "and told me to open it when he was dead. I did so last night after I heard of his death, and the letter was signed in his own name, which was not that he was generally known by."

"What was his name?" asked Mr. Perry.

"Frederick de Carey."

"What!" exclaimed Mrs. Perry and her daughter Alicia in one breath. "Frederick de Carey—the de Carey of Roseworth supposed to be dead!"

"Yes, I conclude so," answered Mr. Winnersley.

Alicia was now thoroughly interested. She had heard, of course, during her stay at Roseworth, of the missing baronet, and had recounted

the circumstances as far as she knew them to her mother ; but that he should be found in the black old sweep she so much despised, she could hardly believe.

"How do you know he is the man he says he is?" asked she, with a mocking tone in her voice.

"Of course I have nothing but his word at present," responded Irwin; "but he left me a box of his to keep for him, and in the letter he told me to bring it to Mr. Perry, and open it in his presence. I have no idea what it contains, and perhaps it will throw some light upon the mystery."

"Have you it with you?" asked the parson.

"It is in the hall."

"I'll go with you to my study, and we will open it there," said Mr. Perry.

"No, indeed," said Alicia, imperiously, "let us all see the wonderful box ; I don't intend to be cheated out of knowing the secrets in it ! What fun it will be !"

Mrs. Perry so strongly seconded her daughter in her demand that the parson gave way, and the box was brought in and placed on a side table, much to Mr. Winnersley's annoyance, for he thought the breakfast-room hardly a fitting

place for such a business, and he greatly objected to the poor old man's belongings being made a matter of amusement. The curate unlocked it, and taking out its contents one by one, placed them on the table beside it.

The box apparently did not contain much of interest; there were a few old books such as would be used at college, an old betting book or two, some manuscript notes, and a gold signet ring bearing a coat of arms and a crest, which Alicia at once identified as those of the de Careys that she had seen at Roseworth.

"There does not seem so much in it after all," said Alicia, in a disappointed tone, "I think the man is an impostor, for he may have stolen the ring."

"Here is a letter at the bottom addressed to Mr. Perry," said Irwin; "perhaps you had better read it first," continued he, handing it to the parson.

Mr. Perry took it with some curiosity, turning it over once or twice before he broke the envelope. "It is dated three years back," said he, beginning to read it to himself.

"Read it out, papa," said Alicia, "don't keep all the good things to yourself."

The letter contained only a few lines, and the parson had rapidly glanced over them while his daughter was speaking.

"Dear me," exclaimed he; "it can't be true—just listen, Elizabeth." And he read as follows:—

"I hereby declare that Emily Crookenden, now living at Oakhanger with her mother, is the next heir to the Warnton estate, if Ralph Warnton dies without a will. And full proof of what I say is in this box.

"FREDERICK DE CAREY."

"What," screamed Mrs. Perry, jumping up from her chair, and her face growing ashy pale; "what does the man dare to say?"

"How can you mind what an impostor like that says, mother?" asked Alicia, with a scornful smile on her face, which was, however, also a little paler than usual.

The parson kept the letter in his hand. "It can hardly be true," said he, "but of course it must be looked into."

"Throw it all into the fire," suggested Alicia, with a sneer.

"No, Alicia, it must be looked into," said her father, more sternly than before.

Mr. Winnersley had remained a silent and pained spectator of this scene ; he felt that it was the outcome of feelings he had no power to quell, and so said nothing. He was as much surprised as anybody at the contents of the letter, and he could not prevent a feeling of gladness passing over him at the thought that it might be true, though he could not at present believe it.

“ Mr. Perry,” said Irwin at last, “ I should not have been carrying out the trust imposed upon me by the old sweep if I had not acted upon what he said, but I assure you that if I had had the slightest idea of what was in the box, I should have left others to tell you.”

“ Of course you could know nothing about it,” said Mr. Perry.

“ Didn’t he though,” muttered Alicia ; “ I know he did.”

“ The best thing to do,” continued the curate, “ will be for you to put all the things into the box again, and keep it in your possession until Mr. Snowden is communicated with ; he of course will know the true value of the statement.”

“ Certainly,” acquiesced Mr. Perry, “ I will seal it up, and put it in the parish safe.”

"Not worth the trouble of doing," sneered Alicia to her mother under her breath.

"Certainly not," responded Mrs. Perry in the same voice, "I should take no notice of what a madman says."

"It is as important to me as it is to you that this matter should be cleared up," said Irwin, "and I shall telegraph to Mr. Snowden at once about it."

The parson seemed somewhat confused, and hardly able to give any opinion on the subject, and Mrs. Perry and her daughter sat apart, in silence as far as the rest of the party were concerned, though speaking in a low voice to each other. The expression of their faces betokened their intense indignation that the statement of the old man should be treated otherwise than as the raving of a madman, while Loyton looked on more unconcerned than any one, with the exception of Mr. Winnersley who outwardly was perfectly calm.

"I should like to send a telegram to Sir Lionel de Carey," resumed Mr. Winnersley, "to tell him that a man calling himself Frederick de Carey has died here."

"I can tell you his address," said Loyton, now

speaking for the first time ; " I had a letter from him just before I left Roseworth."

Alicia threw a glance of anger and contempt at her husband for his readiness to afford information to her enemy, as she now began to consider Irwin ; but Loyton quite misunderstood it, and imagined that it referred merely to his mention of Roseworth, for the conviction had been growing upon him for some time, that even were he squire of ten Warntons, his wife would still be ashamed of his antecedents, and Roseworth was a place she decidedly wished to forget, at all events as far as her residence there was concerned.

Mr. Winnersley noted down the baronet's address, and then having replaced the contents of the box and locked it, the parson sealed it with his seal, and placed it in the parish chest in his own little room.

When the curate was gone, Ellen Perry and Loyton also left the room, leaving Mrs. Perry and her elder daughter alone, and they began to criticize the morning's business in a manner which common decency had hardly restrained even in Mr. Winnersley's presence.

" What a piece of impertinence to come to us

with such a tale! I am so glad he is gone," said Alicia, with an air of intense relief.

"Just like a vulgar, ill-bred person as he is," said Mrs. Perry, "I never did like him."

The parson here re-entered the breakfast-room, and went straight to his own chair by the fire, and sat down.

"Of course it is all a made-up tale," continued Alicia; "what could an old thief like the sweep know about it?"

"Nothing at all, except what the curate told him, I'll be bound," answered Mrs. Perry, "they have made up the plot amongst them."

"Mr. Sleight will soon throw some light on their doings, even if Mr. Snowden is on their side."

"Don't trouble yourself, Alicia; such base designs rarely succeed."

"Why the old wretch must have got hold of the ring to give some show of truth to his tale. I wonder where he stole it from."

"And that low organist woman, too," said Mrs. Perry, "fancy putting her forward to defraud you, Alicia."

"At all events we have possession, mother," said Alicia, as if that settled the question, "and

their tale will have to be a good one to upset that."

Mr. Perry, who had been listening to this outbreak of his wife and daughter with some degree of displeasure, here corrected his daughter's last words.

"You must remember, Alicia, you have not possession for four months yet."

"Well, we have as good as possession; we are here on the spot, and our claim has been allowed."

"Yes, subject to one defect in the pedigree," said Mr. Perry.

"Father, it is too bad of you to go raking things up against your daughter like that," said Alicia, pettishly.

"I think if people turn deceivers, they have no cause to complain if they are themselves deceived in turn," said the parson.

"There you are; can't you let things rest? Hasn't it all come right in the end?"

"If deceit prospers, it is not the less deceit; but we have not come to the end yet."

"Don't you turn round and sneak off to the other side, Edward," exclaimed Mrs. Perry, breaking in angrily, "you ought to know better. We'll have no traitors here."

"Elizabeth, my dear, pray don't excite yourself. There is such a thing as reason."

"And there is such a thing as common sense, a property you never had, and never will have, however long you may live," rejoined Mrs. Perry.

"I shall leave you till your temper is cooler, Elizabeth," said the parson, at last stung into dignity; "this is very disgraceful on your part."

"Go and mind your own business then. I'll mind mine and my daughter's without your interference."

The parson did not answer his wife, but went out of the room, where, after he had gone, the vexations of mother and daughter by mutual interchange were mollified, as when electricity plays from cloud to cloud in harmless summer-lightnings, instead of descending upon the earth as the thunder-bolt.

Mr. Perry went to his little room and mused upon the turn affairs had taken. He, like his wife, could hardly believe the contents of the letter to be true, for even granting that the sweep was the person he represented himself to be, he could not imagine how he could know anything about Mrs. Winnersley's antecedents,

for of course he was not aware of the former friendship that existed between her uncle and Sir Frederick de Carey. But he knew of the fatal blot in Loyton's pedigree, and the very improbability of either a sweep, such as Pilgrimson was, or a person in the position of de Carey, knowing anything about it, seemed in his eyes to give some sanction to the tale. He could not help feeling a natural regret for his daughter's sake, though he would have been the last to wish her to get the estate if she had not the strictest right to it. He had felt much more keenly than Mrs. Perry the disgrace of his daughter's marriage with Loyton, and though in some people's eyes her husband's succession to the Warnton property had condoned the offence, still he had now discovered the purely mercenary motives by which Alicia had been actuated, and they seemed to him to put the matter in a worse light than before. For Loyton himself he could not help feeling very sorry, whichever way the matter might turn out, since he saw how completely he had been a tool in his daughter's hands, and in the one case was likely to be the husband of a disappointed woman who would most probably visit her vexation upon him; or even if he should

after all come into possession of Warnton, he would be a mere nonentity in Alicia's eyes, and the instrument of a heartless and worldly-minded woman, who cared nothing for him ; for the parson could not be blind to the defects in his daughter's character.

Although Mr. Winnersley had been so calm during the foregoing scene, that he might have been taken for a disinterested person, still his mind was in a strange whirl of excitement when he left the Vicarage and walked home, for what meaning the contents of the box might have for him was momentarily growing more evident to him. When Mr. Perry first read the sweep's letter he had been too surprised entirely to recognize its significance, but his gentlemanly instinct at once showed him the awkward position he was placed in as the bearer of such news to the inmates of the Vicarage. But as he walked along in the bright frosty air his ideas began to clear, and his step involuntarily to quicken. What news he would have to tell his wife ! That the sweep should voluntarily have concocted a story that must so much annoy and discredit him and his wife if it were untrue, he would not believe. Moreover, was not the sweep, if he was the person

he represented himself to be, the very person likely to know most about the antecedents of the Crookenden family? And what motive on earth could the old man have had for inventing such a tale? True, the fact might not be so clearly proved by the contents of the box as he thought, but still the truth must be there. Thinking over these things the conviction forced itself upon him that his wife was indeed the next heir to the Warnton estate. What news to tell her! Who could help rejoicing?

"Why, Irwin, what has happened to you?" asked his wife as he entered the room in which she was awaiting his return with no small degree of curiosity.

"Such news, Emily! I begin to think my senses are deceiving me," he exclaimed by way of answer to her remark.

"I should think from your manner that whatever it is, is too good to be believed, not too bad," said Emily.

"Well, it is; you could hardly guess what was in the box."

"Nothing affecting us, is it?"

"Indeed it is, if it is true. It contained a statement that you are now the owner of the

Warnton estate," said Mr. Winnersley, who was too excited to be very serious in his manner.

"I the owner of Warnton estate, Irwin? Impossible!" exclaimed Emily, incredulously. "Do you believe it?"

"I can't help thinking that the old man himself felt sure of it, though he might not be able to prove it."

"What proof does he give?"

"He says the proofs are all in that little box; whether they are or not, of course no one knows. I am now going off to Chancebridge to telegraph to Mr. Snowden, and also to Sir Lionel de Carey. Mr. Perry has sealed up the box without looking at any of the papers, and we must wait now to know what Mr. Snowden thinks of the matter."

And then after a little more conversation, Mr. Winnersley set out to walk to Chancebridge, leaving his wife to ponder over what he had just told her, with no very clear ideas on the subject.

Mr. Snowden that evening sent down a clerk from London to take charge of the box and bring it to him in Lincoln's Inn Fields, for he felt bound to thoroughly investigate everything connected with the estate he had charge of, and

although Mr. Winnersley's tale seemed all the more romantic from being compressed into the space of a telegram, still it was necessary to test it.

Sir Lionel de Carey at once sent his own legal man instructions to go to Warnton, and see if he could identify the body as that of his uncle Frederick. There had been marks on his body which were well known to the family, and which would clearly lead to his identification, for they had been known to many persons when search was made for him after his disappearance. And when the solicitor came he examined the sweep, and fully recognized the body as that of Sir Frederick de Carey.

An inquest was held at the Warnton Arms, and a verdict was returned that Sir Frederick de Carey, Baronet, otherwise John Pilgrimson, had died from natural causes, accelerated by exposure to cold, and after that, in accordance with the present Baronet's wish, he was taken to Roseworth and quietly interred in the vault there with his kindred.

Although the fact that John was not the low-born sweep that he had represented himself to be of course got spread abroad in the parish,

and not only in the parish, but in the county also, still the more important secret connected with him was well kept. Mrs. Perry and her daughter, although entirely disbelieving the tale, took particular care to tell no one that there had been any tale to disbelieve; and Mr. and Mrs. Winnersley did not believe it sufficiently to allow it to make any difference in their quiet life. Alicia, however, made her husband write a letter to Mr. Sleight, every word of which she dictated to him, which, after detailing the facts, contained an indignant appeal to him to prevent such impostors from defrauding him of his rights, and which Mr. Sleight put down at once to its right author. Mr. Sleight, although he had so energetically expressed himself to Mr. Perry on the utter improbability of anyone appearing with a prior right than Loyton's, was not unaware that it was quite possible that some one might do so; but he had made a good bargain for himself with Loyton if he should come into the estate, and on his own account he would have thoroughly investigated the matter, even had he not received so strong an appeal, as he rightly guessed, from Alicia herself. But though he knew that this new claim must spring from the

marriage of Dorothy Warnton with Richard Coyner at Chancebridge church, still he was just as much at sea as to which way to turn to get further information, as he had hoped anybody else might have been who wished to follow up the same clue, and to the sweep's papers of course he had not access, but had, like other people, to wait Mr. Snowden's time to learn their contents.

In consequence of these things the new year did not begin very happily at Warnton Vicarage.





CHAPTER XXV.

THE NEW SQUIRE TAKES POSSESSION.



WEEK went by, and the inhabitants of Warnton Vicarage were still awaiting the verdict of Mr. Snowden upon the sweep's statement.

The frost and snow had gone, and a drizzling rain, descending through mist and fog, had made the Warnton lanes long strips of mud. Although Mrs. Perry had to a certain degree made up her mind that there could not possibly be any truth in the matter, still the excitement affected both her temper and her bodily health. She had caught a cold a day or two after the beginning of the new year, and day by day it appeared to grow worse, until she became really ill. Alicia did not seem much affected by the suspense ;

she went on planning for the future with undiminished energy, for whatever her mother's state of mind might be, she herself was fully persuaded that it was all an imposition. Loyton was not so certain about it, and his indecision caused his wife frequently to rate him soundly about his chicken-heartedness, as she called it; and if he persisted in disagreeing with her, she would leave him alone and go on her own way without thinking of him; but he was getting quite accustomed to be left out of the plans his wife elaborated.

At last a letter came from Mr. Snowden, directed to Mr. Perry, and he read it through to himself, his wife and daughter regarding him with earnest and eager gaze as he did so. His expression grew more and more gloomy as he read it, forbidding them to hope, and at last he laid the letter on the table.

"Alas! it is too true," said he, with a hardly suppressed tremor in his voice.

"Does Mr. Snowden say the sweep's tale is true?" asked Alicia, more quietly and more earnestly than she was accustomed to speak, while her mother looked blankly at Mr. Perry.

"Indeed he does," answered the parson,

speaking in a low tone, and looking straight before him as he placed his elbow on the breakfast table and leaned his head on his hand.

"I don't care," burst out Alicia, "Mr. Sleight will soon put him to rights."

"No!" said Mr. Perry, "Mr. Snowden says there is no earthly doubt about it, and has written to Mr. Sleight to say so, and he says also in his letter that no sane man would dispute it."

And then Alicia became suddenly calm and very pale. "Oh, mother, what am I to do?" she asked in a hushed and trembling voice.

Mrs. Perry had risen from her chair, with pale face and quivering lips, and blank-looking eyes: "What are we to do, you mean," she said, speaking with great effort; and stretching out her hand, and pointing to Alicia, she continued, spasmodically, "you have brought it all upon yourself;—you have—ruined—yourself—and—" and she fell senseless on the floor.

"Oh, mother!" screamed Nellie, starting from her seat, from which she had listened and looked on breathlessly at the scene, and rushing up to her.

Loyton, who had been more unconcerned than anyone, rang the bell for assistance, and hastened

out to dispatch a messenger for Mr. Selton, while Mrs. Perry was carried up stairs to her room. Alicia had flung herself down on the sofa, and burying her face in the cushions, sobbed and cried piteously, without attempting to aid her distressed sister.

The same post that brought this letter to the Vicarage, brought one also to Mr. Winnersley ; it was a very long one, and contained a sketch of the old man's life, some few notes for which were found among his papers.

Mr. Winnersley glanced through it :—

"It is quite true, Emily," said he, simply ; "I will read you Mr. Snowden's letter ;" and while his wife listened eagerly and intently, he read as follows :—

"MY DEAR SIR,

"It is my pleasing duty to tell you that your wife is indeed the heir-at-law to the Warnton estate ; her pedigree and right to it have been made out most clearly from the contents of the box left in your hands by Sir Frederick de Carey. I presume you are aware of the flaw in the pedigree of Mr. Loyton : a certain Dorothy Warnton and Richard Coyner were married at

Chancebridge, and all trace of them was afterwards lost, but nevertheless, if they had had any surviving issue that issue would have had a prior claim to James Loyton, since Joyce Warnton, from whom he is descended, was the daughter of the younger brother of Ralph Warnton, Dorothy's father. But the documents in the box have led me to search a register in the north of England, which proves incontestably that this Richard Coyner had one daughter by Dorothy Warnton, and this daughter was Miss Emily Crookenden's great grandmother. Every step in the descent is proved by reference to registers and other authorities, and, in my opinion, could not be invalidated in any court of law. I hope I have made this plain to you.

“Perhaps a slight sketch of Sir Frederick's life after his disappearance from the University, as far as it can be gleaned from his papers, may be interesting to you. After two or three years of unbridled extravagance and vice, in which James Crookenden was his most intimate associate, and he had spent all the money he could lay his hands upon (the family estates of course were entailed, and he could not touch them), he was prompted to commit a felony by breaking

open some boxes belonging to James Crookenden, in which he had hoped to find money. He had administered an opiate to James Crookenden, who never awoke from the sleep it caused. Alarmed at this, he immediately went abroad, and hung about the gambling tables on the continent, sometimes rich and sometimes poor. He had hurriedly taken some papers and certificates from James Crookenden's boxes, as well as money, thinking they might be advantageous to himself some day, and was surprised to find that they established a claim on James Crookenden's part to the Warnton estate. After living a disreputable life for some years on the continent, a serious illness seized him, and after a long attack, left him an altered man. It seems in some measure to have weakened his mind, and he went at once to Warnton Kings, impelled thereto apparently by a strong desire to be near the property about which he had learnt so much; and though he had not strength of mind to confess his crimes during his lifetime, he seems to have had some idea that some day, by the disclosure of his knowledge, he would try to palliate his offences. It seems that when he arrived at Warnton Kings he immediately attached himself

to the family of Ralph Warnton, entering his service as groom and stableman, and that when his services were no longer required by the family, he still remained about the village, and embraced the occupation of sweep, which he followed till he died.

"And now, sir, I shall be pleased to give up whatever papers and documents I may have relating to the Warnton estate to whoever you may appoint to act for you, but at the same time I shall feel it a great honour if you allow them to remain in the hands of a firm which has been connected with the Warnton property for so many generations.

"I remain, dear Sir,

"Your obedient servant,

"JOHN CHARLES SNOWDEN."

"Poor old man," said Emily, when her husband had finished, "if his sins were great, his punishment was greater."

Then there was a long pause before either spoke again; at last Irwin broke the silence.

"So I have married an heiress after all," he said; "I am so glad for your sake."

"It is a great responsibility," said Emily,

solemnly, "I should have been quite as happy without it."

"We must accept the responsibility," answered Mr. Winnersley. "Heaven grant that we may use our riches well."

"We will do our best," said his wife simply.

"Poor Mrs. Perry! What a disappointment for her and her daughter," said Irwin.

"Oh, Irwin, I don't think there is so much need for gladness as there is for sorrow that things have turned out so," said Emily; "we were happy enough before. I fear that lately it has been all Mrs. Perry's happiness."

They were both too much surprised and overcome at the unexpected news to say much on the matter, and a long pause again followed.

"I will write to Mr. Snowden and ask him what steps I must take in the matter. I really don't know how we should enter upon a new possession like this. I shall be only too glad if he will retain the management of affairs," said Irwin; "don't you think so, Emily?"

"Yes, I do," she answered; "is it ours now?"

"I suppose so," said Irwin; "I will write at once however."

So Mr. Winnersley wrote to Mr. Snowden, and asked him these questions; but until he had received an answer, neither he nor his wife could believe without difficulty the good fortune that had befallen them.

Matters went on that day at Warnton Vicarage in a miserable manner. Mrs. Perry was very ill, so ill that Mr. Selton forbade anybody to go near her except her own maid, who was appointed her nurse. Mr. Perry sat in his little study, grieved not so much for himself, as for his wife and daughter, on whom he knew the shock would fall heavily. For himself he did not care, but although he was not blind to his daughter's faults, he could not help caring for her sake. At the same time there was no one whom he knew who was likely to make so good a use of the property as his curate; far better, no doubt, than his son-in-law, Loyton. Loyton himself was quite unhinged; he wandered in and out of the house, and about the garden, in the mist and gloom of the winter day, thinking of the time when he was a servant there, happier far at that time than now, for wealth had not then been within his grasp, and he had been contented with his lot. Disappointed deeply he was;

knowing nothing of business himself, and trusting in others, he had accepted his position with thankfulness, and when once he thought himself assured of it, he had never imagined that there was any chance of losing that position again.

As for Alicia, she passed the day in alternate paroxysms of grief and anger, and in one of her indignant fits, she penned a letter to Mr. Sleight ordering him to see that her rights were not cheated away from her, telling him to go to law for her, and promising him all sorts of wealth for himself if he would only get for her the Warn-ton estate. And having done this, she seemed somewhat calmer, for she knew, from what she had heard of Jeremiah Sleight, that if there were a shadow of a doubt about it, he would fight to the last, if not for her sake, at least for his own.

But her hopes here again were doomed to disappointment, for the next morning brought a letter from Sleight to Loyton, telling him that Mr. Snowden had sent him a pedigree and proofs, setting out the descent of Mrs. Winersley, and that the case was so clear that no one could dispute it. Therefore, he was sorry to say that all hope of his securing the property for his client must be given up, and he begged

to return to him the agreement he had made with him when at Warnton, at the same time reminding Loyton that he held a note of hand of his for five hundred pounds, which would have to be met in a few months more, and saying this, he begged to remain, Loyton's obliged servant, Jeremiah Sleight.

Her dream had vanished, and there was no hope left. Mrs. Larchpole, in spite of the neglect she had lately received from Mrs. Perry and her daughter, came to see if she could be of any assistance to her or Alicia, but she was not allowed to see her former friend for many weeks after this time, nor did that somewhat one-sided friendship run to such extremes as it had once done.

* * * * *

A month went by, and in Southampton Water, off the Netley Hospital, a large steamer was lying, waiting only for the mailbags before she started to the Brazils. On board of her were James Loyton and his wife, and Mr. Perry, Nellie, and Mrs. Duggard, who had come to see them off. Of the many plans that had been discussed for the Loytons' future, that of making a new home in South America had been decided

upon. When Mr. Winnersley and his wife fully realised their position, their first care was that something should be done for Alicia and her husband, and Mr. Snowden, at Emily's request, wrote and informed James Loyton that a certain sum would be paid to him every year out of the estate, and that his note of hand that Mr. Sleight held would be taken up for him, and half intimating, by Emily's especial desire, that this was an undoubted right of his. It was some time before he would consent to this; and I don't think he would have consented at all, unless his wife had used her influence with him, for she was still not averse to getting what she could. Emily need not have been so careful of Alicia's feelings, for instead of being grateful for a consideration few people would have shown her, she hardly thought she was receiving what was due to her, and only Mr. Perry and Nellie appreciated the delicacy of the action. She asked if it was not her husband's right? The fact of his being related to the late Squire still remained, and even now, justice, she stated, demanded that they should have half the estate, and not only the few hundreds a year they would get from the Winnersleys. But it was not always that she thought

in this way ; her temper had been softened by her disappointment, and unsympathetic as her nature was, she could not help being touched by her mother's sufferings, which had been chiefly caused by her own misbehaviour. Until the day before she left Warnton she had not seen her mother since the morning's post that brought such eventful news ; and by Mr. Selton's orders, an interview, which she seemed to wish to avoid, was not pressed upon Mrs. Perry. Time and quiet were needed for her recovery from so severe a shock, although her condition had ceased to be critical.

And now the mailbags were on board, the last good byes had been said, and the steamer turned her bows to the broad ocean bearing Loyton and his wife to their new home. In the steam tug that brought the mailbags the parson and his daughter and Mrs. Duggard returned, watching with tearful and straining eyes the white handkerchiefs waved by Loyton and Alicia grow dim until they disappeared.

* * * * *

Four months more went by, and Mr. Winnersley and his wife had taken the name of Warnton, and gone to live at the Court. The

villagers, as is the manner of most men, ever ready to hit those who are down and applaud those who are up, decided at once that Mr. Winnersley would make a far better squire than Loyton could ever have made. Cross was somewhat disappointed that the parson's daughter had not come into the property; but he took consolation from the fact that it was the parson's curate at all events who had it, and, therefore, it was still connected with the church. Dorman used to declare that he had always said there was something in it, though his village companions often chaffed him, telling him that the something he saw in it was very different to the something that came out of it. But he would put his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat as usual, smile all over his face, and say that that was just what he said, while he sipped his beer and smoked his long clay pipe, still quite convinced that he was one of the most important and far-seeing persons in the parish. But to-day was a very busy day for Joe: he had to provide a dinner for the cottage tenants, labourers, and old people on the Warnton estate, to celebrate the birth of a son-and-heir to the Warnton property; Ralph Crookenden Warnton was the youngster's name.

And now Mr. Warnton stands on the broad stone steps in front of the Hall, with Emily beside him with her baby in her arms, receiving the congratulations of the villagers before they go to dinner, and exchanging with them pleasant words. And Sam Cleaver comes up to wish them well, with his coat decorated with a large paper rose.

“Why, Sam,” asked Irwin, “where did that rose grow?”

“On the evergreen tree, Mr. Warnton, down by Oakhanger School.”

THE END.



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